

"Then she sang." (Page 195.)

Anna, the Adventuress [*Frontispiece*

ANNA
THE ADVENTURESS

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"A MILLIONAIRE OF YESTERDAY"
ETC ETC

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CHAPTER I

THE CARPET-KNIGHT AND THE LADY

THE girl paused and steadied herself for a moment against a field gate. Her breath came fast in little sobbing pants. Her dainty shoes were soiled with dust. There was a great rent in the lace of her petticoats, gathered high up with her muslin skirt, and clutched in the fingers of her left hand. Very slowly, very fearfully, she turned her head. Her cheeks were the colour of chalk, her eyes were filled with terror. If a cart were coming, or those labourers in the field had heard, escape was impossible. She must return then, and face this terrible thing. If any one had seen—or heard—or were coming now—God help her!

The terror faded from her eyes. A faint gleam of returning colour gave her at once a more natural appearance. So far as the eye could reach the white level road, with its fringe of elm-trees, was empty. Away off in the fields the blue smocked peasants bent still at their toil. They had heard nothing, seen nothing. A few more minutes, and she was safe.

Yet before she turned once more to resume her flight she schooled herself with an effort to look where it had happened. A dark mass of wreckage, over which hung a slight mist of vapour, lay half in the ditch, half across the hedge, close under a tree

from the trunk of which the bark had been torn and stripped. A few yards further off something grey, inert, was lying, a huddled-up heap of humanity twisted into a strange unnatural shape, Again the chalky pallor spread even to her lips, her eyes became lit with the old terror. She withdrew her head with a little moan, and resumed her flight. Away up on the hillside was the little country railway station. She fixed her eyes upon it and ran, keeping always as far as possible in the shadow of the hedge, gazing fearfully every now and then down along the valley for the white smoke of the train.

She reached the station, and mingling with a crowd of excursionists who had come from the river on the other side, took her place in the train unnoticed. She leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. Until the last moment she was afraid. Not until the fields were flying past her, and the speed of the train increased every moment, did she dare to tell herself that she had escaped. It was marvellous fortune! . . .

Arrived in Paris she remembered that she had not the money for a *fiacre*. She was in ill trim for walking, but somehow or other she made her way as far as the Champs Elysées, and sank down upon an empty seat.

She had not at first the power for concealment. Her nerves were shattered, her senses dazed by this unexpected shock. She sat there, a mark for boulevarders, the unconscious object of numberless wondering glances. Paris was full, and it was by no means a retired spot which she had found. Yet she never once thought of changing it. A person of somewhat artificial graces and mannerisms, she was for once in her life perfectly natural. Terror had



"VERY SLOWLY, VERY FEARFULLY, SHE TURNED HER HEAD."

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laid a paralyzing hand upon her, fear kept her almost unconscious of the curious glances which she was continually attracting. She forgot to pose, forgot to assume one of those studied but graceful little attitudes which showed off her lithe, piquant figure to its best possible advantage. She sat huddled up, for once genuinely regardless of effect, panic-stricken as though with the fear of some imminent danger. Every now and then she looked along the boulevard down towards the station. How much further she could see, what manner of grisly picture it was which even now haunted her, who can tell! Yet at such moments her eyes were in-drawn with terror, her fingers clasped frantically the sides of her chair. But though many people stared and whispered remarks loud enough to reach her ear, no one accosted her. For half an hour or more she sat there undisturbed.

Then there came briskly along the path towards her, an Englishman. He was perhaps forty-five years of age. He was dressed with the utmost care, and he set his feet upon the broad walk as though the action were in some way a condescension. He was alert, well-groomed, and yet—perhaps in contrast with the more volatile French type—there was a suggestion of weight about him, not to say heaviness. He too looked at the girl, slackened his pace and looked at her again through his eye-glasses, looked over his shoulder after he had passed, and finally came to a dead stop. He scratched his upper lip reflectively.

It was a habit of his to talk to himself. In the present case it did not matter, as there was no one else within earshot.

"Dear me!" he said. "Dear me! I wonder

what I ought to do. She is English! I am sure of that. She is English, and apparently in some distress. I wonder——"

He turned slowly round. He was inclined to be a good-natured person, and he had no nervous fears of receiving a snub. The girl was pretty, and apparently a lady.

"She cannot be aware," he continued, "that she is making herself conspicuous. It would surely be only common politeness to drop her a hint—a fellow countrywoman too. I trust that she will not misunderstand me. I believe—I believe that I must risk it."

He stood before her, his hat in his hand, his head bent, his voice lowered to a convenient pitch.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but you appear to be a fellow-countrywoman of mine, and in some distress. Can I be of any assistance? I can assure you that it would give me very much pleasure."

Her first upward glance was one of terrified apprehension. When she saw however that this man was a stranger, and obviously harmless, her expression changed as though by magic. A delicate flush of colour streamed into her cheeks. Her eyes fell, and then sought his again with timid interest. Her natural instincts reasserted themselves. She began to act.

"You are very kind," she said hesitatingly, "but I don't remember—I don't think that I know you, do I?"

"I am afraid that you do not," he admitted, with a smile which he meant to be encouraging. "You remind me of the story which they tell against us over here, you know—of the Englishman who refused to be saved from drowning because he was unacquainted

with his rescuer. Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Ferringhall—Sir John Ferringhall."

There was genuine interest in her eyes now. Sir John saw it, and was flattered.

"You are Sir John Ferringhall," she repeated. "Yes, I remember you now. You were pointed out to me at—a few nights ago."

He was not in the least surprised. A millionaire and a knight, even though his money has been made in carpets, is used to being a person of interest.

"Very likely," he answered. "I am fairly well known here. I must apologize, I suppose, for speaking to you, but your appearance certainly indicated that you were in some sort of trouble, and you were becoming—pardon me—an object of comment to the passers-by."

The girl sat up and looked at him with a curious twist at the corners of her mouth—humorous or pathetic, he could not tell which. As though accidently she swept her skirts from a chair close drawn to her own. Sir John hesitated. She was marvellously pretty, but he was not quite sure—yet—that it was advisable for him to sit with her in so public a place. His inclinations prompted him most decidedly to take the vacant chair. Prudence reminded him that he was a county magistrate, and parliamentary candidate for a somewhat difficult borough, where his principal supporters were dissenters of strict principles who took a zealous interest in his moral character. Prudence reminded him also—as an afterthought—that the things which are told of a man in this city of temptations are always believed. Sir John temporized, and the girl raised her eyes once more to his.

"You are the Sir John Ferringhall who has bought

the Lyndmore estate, are you not?" she remarked. "My father's sisters used once to live in the old manor house. I believe you have had it pulled down, have you not?"

"The Misses Pellissier!" he exclaimed. "Then your name——"

"My name is Pellissier. My father was Colonel Pellissier. He had an appointment in Jersey, you know, after he left the army."

Sir John did not hesitate any longer. He sat down.

"Upon my word," he exclaimed, "this is most extraordinary. I——"

Then he stopped short, for he began to remember things. He was not quite sure whether, after all, he had been wise. He would have risen again, but for the significance of the action.

"Dear me!" he said. "Then some of your family history is known to me. One of your aunts died, I believe, and the other removed to London."

The girl nodded.

"She is living there now," she remarked.

"Your father is dead too, I believe," he continued, "and your mother."

"Two years ago," she answered. "They died within a few months of one another."

"Very sad—very sad indeed," he remarked uneasily. "I remember hearing something about it. I believe that the common report was that you and your sister had come to Paris to study painting."

She assented gently.

"We have a small studio," she murmured, "in the Rue de St. Pierre."

Sir John looked at her sideways. Her eyes were fixed upon the ground, the pink colour coming and

going in her cheeks was very delicate and girlish. After all, this could never be the black sheep. He had been quite right to sit down. It was astonishing how seldom it was that his instincts betrayed him. He breathed a little sigh of satisfaction.

"Come," he continued, "the world after all is a very small place. We are not altogether strangers, are we? I feel that under the circumstances I have the right to offer you my advice, and if necessary my help. I beg that you will consider me your friend."

She looked at him with fluttering eyelids—sweetly grateful. It was such an unexpected stroke of fortune. Sir John was not used to such glances, and he liked them.

"It is so difficult," she murmured, "so impossible to explain. Even to my own brother—if I had one—I could not tell everything, and you, although you are so kind, you are almost a stranger, aren't you?"

"No, no!" he protested. "You must not think of me as one. Try and consider me your elder brother, or an old family friend, whichever you like best."

She thanked him with one of her shy little glances. More than ever Sir John was glad that he had sat down.

"It is very, very difficult," she continued, looking steadfastly at the ground. "Only—I have come face to face—with something terrible, an wholly unexpected trouble. I want to leave Paris to-day—this very day. I want to leave it for ever."

He looked at her very gravely.

"But your sister?" he asked. "What of her?"

The girl shuddered—at least if it were not a shudder it was a very good imitation. She kept her eyes fixed upon the ground. She spoke slowly. She was thinking out her way all the time.

"I wish to leave my sister. We cannot agree. It is not possible for us to live together any longer. I want to get away from this hateful city, and if I can—to forget."

Sir John began to see daylight.

"May I ask," he said, "if you have quarrelled with your sister?"

She shook her head.

"No," she answered. "I have not quarrelled with her. It is simply our point of view which is altogether different. I want to get away—to go to London. I cannot explain beyond that."

"Then I am sure," Sir John declared, "that I shall not ask you. I know nothing about the matter, but I feel convinced that you are right. You ought to have had better advice two years ago. Paris is not the place for two young girls. I presume that you have been living alone?"

She sighed gently.

"My sister," she murmured, "is so independent. She is Bohemian to the finger-tips. She makes me feel terribly old-fashioned."

Sir John smiled and congratulated himself upon his insight. He was so seldom wrong.

"The next question, Miss Anna," he said, "is how am I to help you? I am wholly at your disposal."

She looked up at him quickly. Her expression was a little changed, less innocent, more discerning.

"Anna!" she repeated. "How do you know

—why do you think that my name is Anna ?" He smiled in a quietly superior way.

"I think," he said, "that I am right. I am very good at guessing names."

"I am really curious," she persisted. "You must have heard—have you—oh, tell me, won't you ?" she begged. "Have you heard things ?"

The tears stood in her eyes. She leaned a little towards him. Nothing but the publicity of the place and the recollection of that terrible constituency kept him from attempting some perfectly respectful but unmistakable evidence of his sympathy.

"I am afraid," he said gravely, "that your sister has been a little indiscreet. It is nothing at all for you to worry about."

She looked away from him.

"I knew," she said, in a low despairing tone, "that people would talk."

He coughed gently.

"It was inevitable," he declared. "It is not, of course, a pleasant subject of conversation for you or for me, yet I think I may venture to suggest to you that your sister's—er—indiscretions—have reached a point which makes a separation between you almost a necessity."

She covered her face with her hands.

"It—it—must come," she faltered.

"I do not lay claim," he continued, "to any remarkable amount of insight, but it is possible, is it not, that I have stumbled upon your present cause of distress."

"You are wonderful!" she murmured.

He smiled complacently.

"Not at all. This is simply a chapter of coinci-

dences. Now what I want you to feel is this. I want you to feel that you have found a friend who has a strong desire to be of service to you. Treat me as an elder brother, if you like. He is here by your side. How can he help you ? "

She threw such a look upon him that even he, Sir John Ferringhall, carpet-merchant, hide-bound Englishman, slow-witted, pompous, deliberate, felt his heart beat to music. Perhaps the Parisian atmosphere had affected him. He leaned towards her, laid his hand tenderly upon hers. For the first time since he had sat in that chair he utterly and entirely forgot that he was a new-fledged county magistrate and parliamentary candidate for the borough of Tunbridge Wells.

" I hope you realize," he went on, in a lower and less assured tone, " that I am in earnest—very much in earnest. You must let me do whatever I can for you. I shall count it a privilege."

" I believe you," she murmured. " I trust you altogether. I am going to take you entirely at your word. I want to leave Paris to-day. Will you lend me the money for my ticket to London ? "

" With all the pleasure in the world," he answered heartily. " Let me add too that I am thankful for your decision. You have somewhere to go to in London, I hope."

She nodded.

" There is my aunt," she said. " The one who used to live at Lyndmore. She will take me in until I can make some plans. It will be horribly dull, and she is a very trying person. But anything is better than this."

He took out his watch.

" Let me see," he said. " Your best route will be

via Boulogne and Folkestone at nine o'clock from the Gare du Nord. What about your luggage ? "

" I could get a few of my things, at any rate," she said. " My sister is sure to be out."

" Very well," he said. " It is just six o'clock now. Supposing you fetch what you can, and if you will allow me, I will see you off. It would give me great pleasure if you would dine with me somewhere first."

She looked at him wistfully, but with some unwilling doubt in her wrinkled forehead. It was excellently done, especially as she loved good dinners.

" You are very kind to think of it," she said, " but —don't you think perhaps—that I had better not ? "

He smiled indulgently.

" My dear child," he said, " with me you need have no apprehension. I am almost old enough to be your father."

She looked at him with uplifted eyebrows—a look of whimsical incredulity. Sir John felt that after all forty-five was not so very old.

" That sounds quite absurd," she answered. " Yet it is my last evening, and I think—if you are sure that you would like to have me—that I will risk it."

" We will go to a very quiet place," he assured her, " a place where I have often taken my own sisters. You will be wearing your travelling dress, and no doubt you would prefer it. Shall we say at half-past seven ? "

She rose from her chair.

" I will take a carriage," she said, " and fetch my things."

" Let us say the Café Maston, in the Boulevard des Italiennes, at half-past seven then," he decided. " I shall be waiting for you there, and in the meantiem, if you will help yourself—pray don't look like

that. It is a very small affair, after all, and you can pay me back if you will."

She took the pocket-book and looked up at him with a little impulsive movement. Her voice shook, her eyes were very soft and melting.

"I cannot thank you, Sir John," she said. "I shall never be able to thank you."

"Won't you postpone the attempt, then?" he said gallantly, "until I have done something to deserve your gratitude? You will not forget—seven-thirty, Café Maston, Boulevard des Italiennes."

She drove off in a little *fiacre*, nodding and smiling at Sir John, who remained upon the Avenue. He too, when she had disappeared, called a carriage.

"Hotel Ritz," he said mechanically to the coachman. "If only her sister is half as pretty, no wonder that she has set the Parisians talking."

CHAPTER II

THE ADVENTURE OF ANNABEL

THE man spoke mercilessly, incisively, as a surgeon. Only he hated the words he uttered, hated the blunt honesty which forced them from his lips. Opposite, his pupil stood with bowed head and clasped hands.

"You have the temperament," he said. "You have the ideas. Your first treatment of a subject is always correct, always suggestive. But of what avail is this? You have no execution, no finish. You lack only that mechanical knack of expression which is the least important part of an artist's equipment, but which remains a tedious and absolute necessity. We have both tried hard to develop it—you and I—and we have failed. It is better to face the truth."

"Much better," she agreed. "Oh, much better."

"Personally," he went on, "I must confess to a great disappointment. I looked upon you from the very first as the most promising of my pupils. I overlooked the mechanical imperfections of your work, the utter lack of finish, the crudeness of your drawing. I said to myself, 'this will come.' It seems that I was mistaken. You cannot draw. Your fingers are even now as stiff as a schoolgirl's. You will never be able to draw. You have the

ideas. You are an artist by the Divine right of birth, but whatever form of expression may come to you at some future time it will not be painting. Take my advice. Burn your palette and your easel. Give up your lonely hours of work here. Look somewhere else in life. Depend upon it, there is a place for you—waiting. Here you only waste your time."

She was silent, and in the gloom of the dimly lit apartment he could not see her face. He drew a little breath of relief. The worst was over now. He continued tenderly, almost affectionately.

"After all, there are great things left in the world for you. Painting is only one slender branch of the great tree. To-night all this may seem hard and cruel. To-morrow you will feel like a freed woman. To-morrow I shall come and talk to you again—of other things."

A man of infinite tact and kindness, he spoke his message and went. The girl, with a little moan, crossed the room and threw open the window.

She looked steadfastly out. Paris, always beautiful even in the darkness, glittered away to the horizon. The lights of the Champs Elysées and the Place de la Concorde, suggestive, brilliant, seductive, shone like an army of fireflies against the deep cool background of the night. She stood there with white set face and nervously clenched fingers. The echo of those kindly words seemed still to ring in her ears. She was crushed with a sense of her own terrible impotency. A failure! She must write herself down a failure! At her age, with her ambitions, with her artistic temperament and creative instincts, she was yet to be denied all coherent means of expression. She was to fall back amongst

the ruck, a young woman of talent, content perhaps to earn a scanty living by painting Christmas cards, or teaching at a kindergarten. Her fingernails dug into her flesh. It was the bitterest moment of her life. She flung herself back into the bare little room, cold, empty, comfortless. In a momentary fury she seized and tore in pieces the study which remained upon the easel. The pieces fell to the ground in a little white shower. It was the end, she told herself, fiercely. And then, as she stood there, with the fragments of the torn canvas at her feet, some even caught upon her skirt, the door was thrown open, and a girl entered humming a light tune.

The newcomer stopped short upon the threshold.

"Anna! What tragedy has happened, little sister? No lights, no supper, no coffee—and, above all, no Mr. Courtlaw. How dreary it all looks. Never mind. Come and help me pack. I'm off to England."

"Annabel, are you mad? To England! You are joking, of course. But come in, dear. I will light the stove, and there shall be some coffee presently."

"Coffee! Bah!"

The newcomer picked her way across the floor with daintily uplifted skirts, and subsided into a deck chair of stretched canvas.

"I will not rob you of your coffee, most dutiful of sisters!" she exclaimed. "I have had adventures—oh, more than one, I can assure you. It has been a marvellous day—and I am going to England."

Anna looked at her sister gravely. Even in her painting smock and with her disarranged hair, the likeness between the two girls was marvellous.

"The adventures I do not doubt, Annabel," she said. "They seem to come to you as naturally as disappointment—to other people. But to England! What has happened, then?"

Already the terror of a few hours ago seemed to have passed away from the girl who leaned back so lazily in her chair, watching the tip of her patent shoe swing backwards and forwards. She could even think of what had happened. Very soon she would be able to forget it.

"Happened! Oh, many things," she declared indolently. "The most important is that I have a new admirer."

The wonderful likeness between the two girls was never less noticeable than at that moment. Anna stood looking down upon her sister with grave perturbed face. Annabel lounged in her chair with a sort of insolent *abandon* in her pose, and wide-open eyes which never flinched or drooped. One realized indeed then where the differences lay; the tender curves about Anna's mouth transformed into hard sharp lines in Annabel's, the eyes of one, truthful and frank, the other's more beautiful but with less expression—windows lit with dazzling light, but through which one saw—nothing.

"A new admirer, Annabel? But what has that to do with your going to England?"

"Everything! He is Sir John Ferringhall—very stupid, very respectable, very egotistical. But, after all, what does that matter? He is very much taken with me. He tries hard to conceal it, but he cannot."

"Then why," Anna asked quietly, "do you run away? It is not like you."

Annabel laughed softly.

"How unkind!" she exclaimed. "Still, since it is better to tell you, Sir John is very much in earnest, but his respectability is something altogether too overpowering. Of course I knew all about him years ago, and he is exactly like everybody's description of him. I am afraid, Anna, just a little afraid, that in Paris I and my friends here might seem a trifle advanced. Besides, he might hear things. That is why I called myself Anna."

"You—you did what?" Anna exclaimed.

"Called myself Anna," the girl repeated coolly. "It can't make any difference to you, and there are not half a dozen people in Paris who could tell us apart."

Anna tried to look angry, but her mouth betrayed her. Instead, she laughed, laughed with lips and eyes, laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks.

"You little wretch!" she exclaimed weakly. "Why should I bear the burden of your wickedness? Who knows what might come of it? I shall permit nothing of the sort."

Annabel shrugged her shoulders.

"Too late, my dear girl," she exclaimed. "I gave your name. I called myself Anna. After all, what can it matter? It was just to make sure. Three little letters can't make a bit of difference."

"But it may matter very much indeed," Anna declared. "Perhaps for myself I do not mind, but this man is sure to find out some day, and he will not like having been deceived. Tell him the truth, Annabel."

"The truth!"

There was a brief but intense silence. Anna felt that her words had become charged with a fuller

and more subtle meaning than any which she had intended to impart. "The truth!" It was a moment of awkwardness between the two sisters—a moment, too, charged with its own psychological interest, for there were secrets between them which for many months had made their intercourse a constrained and difficult thing. It was Annabel who spoke.

"How crude you are, Anna!" she exclaimed with a little sigh. "Sir John is not at all that sort. He is the kind of man who would much prefer a little dust in his eyes. But heavens, I must pack!"

She sprang to her feet and disappeared in the room beyond, from which she emerged a few minutes later with flushed cheeks and dishevelled hair.

"It is positively no use, Anna," she declared, appealingly. "You must pack for me. I am sorry, but you have spoilt me. I can't do it even decently myself, and I dare not run the risk of ruining all my clothes. Listen! What's that?"

There was a sharp tap at the door. The words seemed to die away on Annabel's lips. The old look of terror for a moment convulsed her face. Anna, seeing it, caught her by the arm.

"Annabel, what is the matter?"

They were face to face in the middle of the room, Anna on her way to open the door. But her sister interposed.

"Don't answer it, Anna! Come!"

The gesture was one of entreaty. Anna found herself perforce obeying it. The two girls stole away into the inner room. Annabel softly locked the door, but remained kneeling down by the keyhole. They were scarcely concealed before the

outer door opened, and the shrill voice of Marie, the eldest daughter of their concierge, commenced a torrent of expostulations.

"But you see! It is as I told you, monsieur. The room is empty. The young mademoiselle has been here and gone. She packed her boxes in one half-hour and departed for England. It was a loss, but what matters? Such rooms let easily—monsieur can see for himself the beautiful light, the view too."

A man's voice interposed—coarse and strident, the voice of an Englishman speaking the most abominable French.

"I wonder whether you are telling the truth, girl!"

Marie was justly indignant. Her shrill voice grew shriller.

"But what does monsieur suppose? Is it for such insults that I have climbed all these stairs and admitted monsieur here? Well, it is over. Monsieur will be so good as to descend at once."

The unseen man pointed apparently to the door, behind which the girl was cowering.

"There's another room there! How do I know that she isn't hiding? If what I guess is true, she'll be none too anxious to be dropped upon just yet."

"And what business of monsieur's is it if there is another room there?" Marie demanded. "He asks for Mademoiselle Pellissier, and I tell him that she is gone, gone, gone! *Is it* so difficult to understand? Those rooms beyond were not even let to her. They are let to another tenant. If monsieur pleases."

Monsieur was apparently bundled out. The outer door was closed. Steps were heard descend-

ing the stone stairs. Anna looked with grave eyes at the girl who was still on her knees by the keyhole, and whose face was blanched with terror.

"Is it you, Annabel?" she asked, in a low tone, "who have bought these lies from Marie?"

Annabel rose slowly to her feet. Her knees were still trembling. The hunted look remained in her eyes. She had had a shock.

"There was no buying," she answered. "Marie was always our friend. I told her if any one came for me—that I had left. I do not wish to be worried just now."

"Who is that man?"

"I do not know!"

"Nonsense. Who is he?"

"Indeed I do not know," Annabel persisted. "He is the friend of some one I loathe, some one of whom I am afraid. There are several of them. They pester me to death."

"You are going to England to escape from him?"

"Partly—yes."

"Why? What is he to you? What harm can he do you?"

Annabel, mercurial, inconsistent, a strange mixture of coward and fatalist, began to recover herself. She rose to her feet. The footsteps of Marie and her companion had died away.

"None," she declared, "none whatever. I am so easily upset, but I hate to be bothered. Please go on with my packing. I have so little time. Don't crush my *crêpe de Chine*, whatever you do. I shall have to take your trunk. Sorry, but you won't be going away just yet, shall you?"

"You have told me all that you intend to?" Anna asked.

"Don't be melodramatic. There is nothing to tell."

Anna continued her task in silence. With deft fingers she created order out of chaos. Soon the trunk, portmanteau and hat box were ready. Then she took her sister's hand. It was as cold as ice.

"Annabel," she said, "I have never asked you for your confidence. We have lived under the same roof, but our ways seem to have lain wide apart. There are many things which I do not understand. Have you anything to tell me before you go?"

Annabel laughed lightly. Already she was almost herself again.

"My dear Anna! As though I should think of depressing you with my long list of misdeeds."

"You have nothing to tell me?"

"Nothing!"

So Annabel departed with the slightest of farewells, wearing a thick travelling veil, and sitting far back in the corner of a closed carriage. Anna watched her from the windows, watched the carriage jolt away along the cobbled street and disappear. Then she stepped back into the empty room and stood for a moment looking down upon the scattered fragments of her last canvas.

"It is a night of endings," she murmured to herself. "Perhaps for me," she added, with a sudden wistful look out of the bare high window, "a night of beginnings."

CHAPTER III

ANNA? OR ANNABEL?

SIR JOHN was wholly unable to understand the laugh and semi-ironical cheer which greeted his entrance to the smoking-room of the English Club on the following evening. He stood upon the threshold, dangling his eye-glasses in his fingers, stolid, imperturbable, mildly interrogative. He wanted to know what the joke against him was —if any.

"May I inquire," he asked smoothly, "in what way my appearance contributes to your amusement? If there is a joke I should like to share it."

A fair-haired young Englishman looked up from the depths of his easy chair.

"You hear him?" he remarked, looking impressively around. "A joke! Sir John, if you had presented yourself here an hour ago we should have greeted you in pained silence. We had not then recovered from the shock. Our ideal had fallen. A sense of loss was amongst us. Drummond," he continued, looking across at his *vis-à-vis*, "we look to you to give expression to our sentiments. Your career at the bar has given you a command of language, also a self-control not vouchsafed to us ordinary mortals. Explain to Sir John our feelings."

Drummond, a few years older, dark, clean-shaven, with bright eyes and humorous mouth, laid down his paper and turned towards Sir John. He removed his cigarette from his lips and waved it gently in the air.

"Holcroft," he remarked, "in bald language, and with the usual limitations of his clouded intellect, has still given some slight expression to the consternation which I believe I may say is general amongst us. We looked upon you, my dear Sir John, with reverence, almost with awe. You represented to us the immaculate Briton, the one Englishman who typified the Saxonism, if I may coin a word, of our race. We have seen great and sober-minded men come to this unholy city, and become degenerates. We have known men who have come here for no other purpose than to prove their unassailable virtue, who have strode into the arena of temptation, waving the—the what is it—the white flower of a blameless life, only to exchange it with marvellous facility for the violets of the Parisienne. But you, Ferringhall, our pattern, an erstwhile Sheriff of London, a county magistrate, a prospective politician, a sober and an upright man, one who, had he aspired to it, might even have filled the glorious position of Lord Mayor—James, a whisky and Apollinaris at once. I cannot go on. My feelings overpower me."

"You all seem to be trying to pull my leg," Sir John remarked quietly. "I suppose you'll come to the point soon—if there is one."

Drummond shook his head in melancholy fashion.

"He dissembles," he said. "After all, how easy the descent is, even for the greatest of us. I hope that James will not be long with that whisky and

Apollinaris. My nerves are shaken. I require stimulant."

Sir John seated himself deliberately.

"I should imagine," he said, shaking out a copy of *The Times*, "that it is your brain which is addled."

Drummond looked up with mock eagerness.

"This," he exclaimed, "must be either the indifference of an utterly callous nature, or it may be—ye gods, it may be—innocence. Holcroft, we may have been mistaken."

"Think not," that young man remarked laconically.

"I will put the question," Drummond said gravely. "Ferringhall, were you or were you not dining last night at a certain restaurant in the Boulevard des Italiennes with—*la petite* Pellissier ?"

Now indeed Sir John was moved. He sat up in his chair as though the question had stung him. *The Times* slipped from his fingers. His eyes were bright, and his voice had in it an unaccustomed *timbre.*

"It is true," he said, "that I was dining last night at a restaurant in the Boulevard des Italiennes, and it is true that my companion was a young lady whose name is Pellissier. What of it ?"

There was a shout of laughter. Sir John looked about him, and somehow the laugh died away. If such a thing in connexion with him had been possible they would have declared that he was in a towering rage. An uncomfortable silence followed. Sir John once more looked around him.

"I repeat, gentlemen," he said, in an ominously low tone, "what of it ?"

Drummond shrugged his shoulders.

"You seem to be taking our little joke more seriously than it deserves, Ferringhall," he remarked.

"I fail to see the joke," Sir John said. "Kindly explain it to me."

"Certainly! The thing which appeals to our sense of humour is the fact that you and *la petite* Pellissier were dining together."

"Will you tell me," Sir John said ponderously, "by what right you call that young lady—*la petite* Pellissier? I should be glad to know how you dare to allude to her in a public place in such a disrespectful manner!"

Drummond looked at him and smiled.

"Don't be an ass, Ferringhall," he said tersely. "Annabel Pellissier is known to most of us. I myself have had the pleasure of dining with her. She is very charming, and we all admire her immensely. She sings twice a week at the Ambassador's and the Casino Mavise——"

Sir John held up his hand.

"Stop," he said. "You do not even know what you are talking about. The young lady with whom I was dining last night was Miss Anna Pellissier. Miss Annabel is her sister. I know nothing of that young lady."

There was a moment's silence. Drummond took up a cigarette and lit it.

"The young lady, I presume, told you that her name was Anna," he remarked.

"It was not necessary," Sir John answered stiffly. "I was already aware of the fact. I may add that the family is well known to me. The two aunts of these young ladies lived for many years in the dower house upon my estate in Hamp-

shire. Under the circumstances you must permit me to be the best judge of the identity of the young lady who did me the honour, as an old family friend, of dining with me."

Like most men who lie but seldom, he lied well. Drummond smoked his cigarette meditatively. He remembered that he had heard stories about the wonderful likeness between these two sisters, one of whom was an artist and a recluse, whilst the other had attached herself to a very gay and a very brilliant little *coterie* of pleasure-seekers. There was a bare chance that he had been mistaken. He thought it best to let the matter drop. A few minutes later Sir John left the room.

He walked out into the Champs Elysées and sat down. His cigar burnt out between his fingers, and he threw it impatiently away. He had seldom been more perturbed. He sat with folded arms and knitted brows, thinking intently. The girl had told him distinctly that her name was Anna. Her whole conduct and tone had been modest and ladylike. He went over his interview with her again, their conversation at dinner-time. She had behaved in every way perfectly. His spirits began to rise. Drummond had made an abominable mistake. It was not possible for him to have been deceived. He drew a little sigh of relief.

Sir John, by instinct and training, was an unimaginative person. He was a business man, pure and simple, his eyes were fastened always upon the practical side of life. Such ambitions as he had were stereotyped and material. Yet in some hidden corner was a vein of sentiment, of which for the first time in his later life he was now unexpectedly aware. He was conscious of a peculiar

pleasure in sitting there and thinking of those few hours which already were becoming to assume a definite importance in his mind—a place curiously apart from those dry-as-dust images which had become the gods of his prosaic life. Somehow or other his reputation as a hardened and unassailable bachelor had won for him during the last few years a comparative immunity from attentions on the part of those women with whom he had been brought into contact. It was a reputation by no means deserved. A wife formed part of his scheme of life, for several years he had been secretly but assiduously looking for her. In his way he was critical. The young ladies in the somewhat mixed society amongst which he moved neither satisfied his taste or appealed in any way to his affections. This girl whom he had met by chance and befriended had done both. She possessed what he affected to despise, but secretly worshipped, the innate charm of breeding. The Pellissiers had been an old family in Hampshire, while his grandfather had driven a van. The fact itself was nothing to him, but it placed the girl very far apart from the young ladies of Hampstead and Balham, whose fathers and brothers had been his associates. He believed in her firmly. This club gossip and chaff to which he had been subjected was annoying enough, but ridiculous. He chose a fresh cigar, and strolling along under the trees, here and there touched with the lurid brilliancy of the electric lights, gave himself up to the rare luxury of imaginative thought.

As in all things, so his thoughts came to him deliberately. He pictured himself visiting her in this shabby little home of her aunt's—she had

told him that it was shabby—and he recalled that delicious little smile with which she would surely greet him, a smile which seemed to be a matter of the eyes as well as the lips. She was poor. He was heartily thankful for it. He thought of his wealth for once from a different point of view. How much he would be able to do for her. Flowers, theatre boxes, carriages, the "open sesame" to the whole world of pleasure. He himself, middle-aged, steeped in traditions of the City and money-making, very ill-skilled in all the lighter graces of life, as he himself well knew, could yet come to her invested with something of the halo of romance by the almost magical powers of an unlimited banking account. She should be lifted out of her narrow little life, and it should be all owing to him. And afterwards! Sir John drew his cigar from his lips, and looked upwards where the white lights flashed strangely amongst the deep cool green of the lime-trees. His lips parted in a rare smile. Afterwards was the most delightful part of all! . . .

If only there had not been this single torturing thought—a mere pin-prick, but still curiously persistent. Suddenly he stopped short. He was in front of one of the more imposing of the *cafés chantants*—opposite, illuminated with a whole row of lights, was the wonderful poster which had helped to make Alcide famous. He had looked at it before without comprehension. To-night the subtle suggestiveness of those few daring lines, fascinating in their very simplicity, the head thrown back, the half-closed eyes—the inner meaning of the great artist seemed to come to him with a rush. He stood still, almost breathless. A slow anger burned in the man. It was debauching, this—a

devilish art which drew such strange allurements from a face and figure almost Madonna-like in their simplicity. Unwillingly he drew a little nearer, and became one of the group of loiterers about the entrance. A woman touched him lightly on the arm, and smiled into his face.

"Monsieur admires the poster?"

As a rule Sir John treated such advances with cold silence. This woman, contrary to his custom, he answered.

"It is hateful—diabolical!" he exclaimed.

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"It is a great art," she said in broken English. "The little English girl is very fortunate. For what indeed does she do? A simple song, no gesture, no acting, nothing. And they pay her. Monsieur is going inside perhaps?"

But Sir John's eyes were still riveted upon the poster, and his heart was beating with unaccustomed force. For just as though a vague likeness is sometimes borne swiftly in upon one, so a vague dissimilarity between the face on the poster and the heroine of his thoughts had slowly crept into his consciousness. He drew a little breath and stepped back. After all, he had the means of setting this tormenting doubt at rest. She had mentioned the address where she and her sister had lived. He would go there. He would see this sister. He would know the truth then once and for all. He walked hastily to the side of the broad pavement and summoned a *fiacre*.

CHAPTER IV

THE TEMPERAMENT OF AN ARTIST

"YOU may sit there and smoke, and look out upon your wonderful Paris," she said lightly. "You may talk—if you can talk cheerfully, not unless."

"And you?" he asked.

"Well, if I find your conversation interesting I shall listen. If not, I have plenty to think about," she answered, leaning back in her chair, and watching the smoke from her own cigarette curl upwards.

"For instance?"

She smiled.

"How I am to earn enough *sous* for my dinner to-morrow—or failing that, what I can sell."

His face darkened.

"And yet," he said, "you bid me talk cheerfully, or not at all."

"Why not? Your spirits at least should be good. It is not you who runs the risk of going dinnerless to-morrow."

He turned upon her almost fiercely.

"You know," he muttered, "you know quite well that your troubles are far more likely to weigh upon me than my own. Do you think that I am utterly selfish?"

She raised her eyebrows.

"Troubles, my friend," she exclaimed lightly. "But I have no troubles."

He stared at her incredulously, and she laughed very softly.

"What a gloomy person you are!" she murmured. "You call yourself an artist—but you have no temperament. The material cares of life hang about your neck like a millstone. A doubt as to your dinner to-morrow would make you miserable to-night. You know I call that positively wicked. It is not at all what I expected either. On the whole, I think that I have been disappointed with the life here. There is so little *abandon*, so little real joyousness."

"And yet," he murmured, "one of the greatest of our writers has declared that the true spirit of Bohemianism is denied to your sex."

"He was probably right," she declared. "Bohemianism is the least understood word ever coined. I do not think that I have the Bohemian spirit at all."

He looked at her thoughtfully. She wore a plain black dress, reaching almost to her throat—her small oval face, with the large brown eyes, was colourless, delicately expressive, yet with something mysterious in its Sphinx-like immobility. A woman hard to read, who seemed to delight in keeping locked up behind that fascinating rigidity of feature the intense sensibility which had been revealed to him, her master, only in occasional and rare moments of enthusiasm. She reminded him sometimes of the one holy and ineffable Madonna, at others of Berode, the great courtezan of her day, who had sent kings away from her doors, and had just announced her intention of ending

her life in a convent. Courtlaw himself, plain of feature, rugged, but a man of many emotions and a great artist, found in her presence something akin to inspiration. The faces of most women are like open books. This girl, young, friendless, unsuccessful, met misfortune with a jest, revealed herself to no one, not even to him, maintaining side by side with the utmost freedom of deportment a delicate aloofness which seemed to trace with fairy fingers a line imperceptible yet vividly real and efficient.

"I believe that you are right," he said softly. "It is the worst of including in our vocabulary words which have no definite meaning, perhaps I should say of which the meaning varies according to one's personal point of view. You, for instance, you live, you are not afraid to live. Yet you make our Bohemianism seem like a vulgar thing."

She stirred gently in her chair.

"My friend," she said, "I have been your pupil for two years. You have watched all the uncouth creations of my brain come sprawling out upon the canvas, and besides, we have been companions. Yet the fact remains that you do not understand me at all. No, not one little bit. It is extraordinary."

"It is," he replied, "the one humiliation of my life. My opportunities have been immense, and my failure utter. If I had been your companion only, and not your master, I might very well have been content to accept you for what you seem. But there have been times, Anna, when your work has startled me. Ill-drawn, without method or sense of proportion, you have put wonderful things on to canvas, have drawn them out of yourself, notwithstanding your mechanical inefficiency. God knows how you did it. You are utterly baffling."

She laughed at him easily and mirthfully.

"Dear friend," she said, "do not magnify me into a physiological problem. I should only disappoint you terribly some day. I think I know where I am puzzling you now——"

"Then for Heaven's sake be merciful," he exclaimed. "Lift up one corner of the curtain for me."

"Very well. You shall tell me if I am wrong. You see me here, an admitted failure in the object to which I have devoted two years of my life. You know that I am practically destitute, without means or any certain knowledge of where my next meal is coming from. I speak frankly, because you also know that no possible extremity would induce me to accept help from any living person. You notice that I have recently spent ten francs in a box of the best Russian cigarettes, and that there are roses upon my table. You observe that I am, as usual, fairly cheerful, and moderately amiable. It surprises you. You do not understand, and you would like to. Very well! I will try to help you."

Her hand hung over the side of her chair nearest to him. He looked at it eagerly, but made no movement to take it. During all their long comradeship he had never so much as ventured to hold her fingers. This was David Courtlaw, whose ways, too, had never been very different from the ways of other men as regards her sex.

"You see, it comes after all," she continued, "from certain original convictions which have become my religion. Rather a magniloquent term, perhaps, but what else am I to say? One of these is that the most absolutely selfish thing in the

world is to give way to depression, to think of one's troubles at all except of how to overcome them. I spend many delightful hours thinking of the pleasant and beautiful things of life. I decline to waste a single second even in considering the ugly ones. Do you know that this becomes a habit ? "

" If you would only teach us all," he murmured, " how to acquire it."

" I suppose people would say that it is a matter of temperament," she continued. " With me I believe that it is more. It has become a part of the order of my life. Whatever may happen to-morrow I shall be none the better for anticipating its miseries to-day."

" I wonder," he said, a trifle irrelevantly, " what the future has in store for you."

She shrugged her shoulders.

" Is that not rather a profitless speculation, my friend ? "

He seemed deaf to her interruption. His grey eyes burned under his shaggy eyebrows. He leaned towards her as though anxious to see more of her face than that faint delicate profile gleaming like marble in the uncertain light.

" You were born for great things," he said huskily. " For great passions, for great accomplishments. Will you find your destiny, I wonder, or will you go through life like so many others—a wanderer, knocking ever at empty doors, homeless to the last ? Oh, if one could but find the way to your heart."

She laughed gaily.

" Dear friend," she said, " remember that you are speaking to one who has failed in the only

serious object which she has ever sought to accomplish. My destiny, I am afraid, is going to lead me into the ruts."

He shook his head.

"You were never born," he declared, "to follow the well worn roads. I wonder," he added, after a moment's pause, "whether you ever realize how young you are."

"Young? I am twenty-four."

"Yet you are very young. Anna, why will you persist in this single-handed combat with life?"

"Don't!" she cried.

"But I must, I will," he answered fiercely. "Oh, I know you would stop me if you could. This time you cannot. You are the woman I love, Anna. Let me make your future for you. Don't be afraid that I shall stunt it. I will give you a broad free life. You shall have room to develop, you shall live as you will, where you will, only give me the right to protect you, to free you from all these petty material cares."

She laid her hand softly upon his.

"Dear friend," she said, "do you not think that you are breaking an unspoken compact? I am very sorry. In your heart you know quite well that all that you have said is useless."

"Ay," he repeated, looking away from her. "Useless—worse than useless."

"You are foolish," she declared, with a note of irritability in her tone. "You would appear to be trying to destroy a comradeship which has been very, very pleasant. For you know that I have made up my mind to dig a little way into life single-handed. I, too, want to understand—to

walk with my head in the light. Love is a great thing, and happiness a joy. Let me go my own way towards them. We may meet—who can tell? But I will not be fettered, even though you would make the chains of roses. Listen."

She stopped short. There was a sharp knocking at the outside door. Courtlaw rose to his feet.

"It is too late for visitors," she remarked. "I wonder would you mind seeing who it is."

Courtlaw crossed the room and threw open the door. He had come to Anna's rooms from a dinner party, and he was in evening dress. Sir John, who was standing outside, looked past him at the girl still sitting in the shadow.

"I believe," he said stiffly, "that these are the apartments of Miss Pellissier. I must apologize for disturbing you at such an unseemly hour, but I should be very much obliged if Miss Pellissier would allow me a few minutes' conversation. My name is Ferringhall—Sir John Ferringhall."



"SIR JOHN . . . LOOKED PAST HIM AT THE GIRL."

Anna the Adventuress.] [Page 4

CHAPTER V

"ALCIDE"

COURTLAW took up his hat and coat at once, but Anna motioned him to remain.

"Please stay," she said briefly. "Will you come in, Sir John. I believe that I have heard my sister speak of you. This is my friend, Mr. David Courtlaw—Sir John Ferringhall."

Sir John acknowledged the introduction without cordiality. He entered the room with his usual deliberation, and looked covertly about him. He noticed the two chairs close together. Anna was still holding her cigarette between her fingers. Her likeness to her sister gave him at first almost a shock; a moment afterwards he was conscious of a wonderful sense of relief. For if the likeness between the sisters was remarkable, the likeness between this girl and the poster which he had come from studying was more remarkable still.

"I must repeat," Sir John said, "that I much regret disturbing you at such an unseemly hour. My only excuse is that I missed my way here, and I am leaving Paris early to-morrow morning."

"If your business with me is of any importance," Anna said calmly, "it does not matter in the least about the hour. Have you brought me a message

from my sister? I understood, I believe, that she was seeing you last night."

"Your sister," he answered, "did me the honour of dining with me last night."

"Yes."

After all, it was not so easy. The girl's eyes never left his face. She was civil, but she was obviously impatient to know his errand. Afraid, no doubt, he thought grimly, that her other visitor would leave.

"I believe," he said slowly, "that I shall do best to throw myself upon your consideration and tell you the truth. I have recently made your sister's acquaintance, and in the course of conversation I understood from her that her Christian name was Anna. Some friends who saw us dining together persist in alluding to her as Miss Annabel Pellissier. I am guilty practically of the impertinence of coming to ask you whether I misunderstood your sister."

"Is my sister's Christian name, then, of so much importance to you?" she asked with a faint smile.

"The things involved in it are," he answered gravely.

She accepted his rejoinder with a brief nod. Courtlaw opened his lips, but remained silent in the face of her imperative gesture.

"Let me hasten," she said, "to reassure you. My sister was scarcely likely to make a mistake. She told you—the truth."

Courtlaw's walking stick, which he had been handling, fell with a crash to the ground. He stooped to recover it, and his face was hidden. Sir John felt and looked several years younger.

"I am much obliged to you," he said. "Really, I do not know why I should have doubted it."

"Nor I," she remarked tersely.

He looked at her with a certain curiosity. She was a very elegant young woman, slightly taller perhaps than her sister, and with an air of reserved strength underneath her quiet face and manner which Annabel may have lacked. It was hard to associate her with the stories which he and all Paris had heard of "Alcide."

"You, then," he said, "are 'Alcide.' That wonderful poster—is of you."

She lifted her eyebrows.

"I am sorry," she said, "if you find the likeness unsatisfactory. My friends consider it wonderfully faithful. Have you any more questions to ask me?"

Sir John, on his way down, had determined to hint to this young woman that, providing certain contingencies which he had in his mind should come to pass, he would be prepared to make her a handsome offer to change her name. He found, however, that now the time had come he utterly lacked the courage to attempt any such speech.

"None, I thank you," he answered. "I will not intrude upon you further."

"Wait," she said.

He turned back at once.

"I have answered all your questions," she said. "Perhaps you will not object to answering one for me. You have thought it worth while to take some considerable pains to resolve for yourself my sister's identity. May I ask the nature of your interest in her?"

He hesitated.

"It is not an easy matter," he said, "for me to offer you an altogether adequate explanation. I

have only seen your sister for a very brief time, and I am a little past the age when a man does head-strong things. At the same time, I must say that I am most anxious to improve my acquaintance with her. I am a single man, and——"

"Thank you," she interrupted. "I will not ask you to explain further. Good-night."

He left at once, immensely relieved, yet scarcely satisfied with himself as regarded his share of the interview with this young woman. They heard his footsteps descending the stone staircase, growing fainter and fainter. Then Courtlaw looked across at her with a white puzzled face.

"Why did you lie to that man?" he asked fiercely. "How dared you do yourself this injustice?"

"I did it for her sake," she answered. "It may be her salvation. I believe that he will marry her."

"You would let him—knowing—all that you know?"

"Why not? She is my flesh and blood. She is more dear to me than anything else. Perhaps if I had watched over her more closely, things would have been different."

"You! Why, you have been an angel to her," he exclaimed impatiently. "You know very well that she is selfish and pleasure-loving to the back-bone. You have made enough sacrifices for her surely without this. Besides, you cannot tell where it will end. You have taken upon your shoulders the burden of her misdeeds. You may have to carry them further and longer than you think. Oh, it is unbearable."

The man's face was dark with passion. It was as though he were personally aggrieved. His tone

was rough, almost threatening. The girl only smiled at him serenely, but she laid her hand for a moment quietly upon his.

"Dear friend," she said, "this is a matter which you must leave to me to do as I think best. Annabel is my only sister, you know, almost my only relative. If I do not look after her, she has no one. And she is very young, younger than her years."

It was significant of her influence over him that he answered her calmly, although a storm of angry thoughts were struggling for expression within him.

"Look after her! Why not? But you have done it all your life. You have been her guardian angel. But even you cannot alter her character. Annabel was born soulless, a human butterfly, if ever there was one. The pursuit of pleasure, self-gratification, is an original instinct with her. Blood and bone, body and spirit, she is selfish through and through. Even you have not been able to hold her back. I speak no harm of her. She is your sister, and God knows I wish her none. But——"

A look checked him.

"I know," she said quietly, "that Paris, where she has been so much admired, is not a good place for her. That is why I am glad that she has gone to London."

He rose from his chair, and walked restlessly up and down the room. The passion of pent-up speech compelled action of some sort. There was a black fear in his heart. He stopped before her suddenly.

"You, too," he said abruptly. "You mean to follow her. You will go to London?"

"It is necessary," she answered. "You yourself have decided that—apart from the question of Annabel."

He was suddenly calm.

"It is part of the irony of life," he said. "One is always playing the surgeon, one kills always the thing one loves best. I meant to lie to you, Would to God I had."

She shook her head.

"The surgeon's knife is surely a kindly weapon," she declared. "It was best for me to know. Later on I could scarcely have forgiven you."

"And now—I am to lose you."

"For a little time," she answered. "I meant to say good-bye to you to-night. Or, after all, is it worth while? The Channel is a little broader than the Boulevards—but one crosses it sometimes."

He looked at her with white, set face.

"Yes," he said, "I shall come. That is very certain. But, after all, it will be different. I think that I have become a drug drinker. I need you every day. In the mornings I find labour easy because I am going to see you. In the afternoon my brain and fingers leap to their work because you have been with me. Anna, you shall not go. I cannot let you go."

She threw away the end of her cigarette. Without turning or looking in his direction she leaned forwards, her head supported upon her fingers, her elbows upon her knees. She gazed steadily out of the window at that arc of glittering lights. He made a quick movement towards her, but she did not flinch. His arm fell to his side. The effort of self-repression cost him a sob.

"David," she said, "you are not a coward, are you?"

"I do not know," he muttered. "The bravest of us have joints in our armour."

" You are not a coward," she repeated, " or you would not be my friend. A woman may choose any one for her lover, but for her friend she makes no mistake. You are not a coward, David, and you must not talk like one. Put out your hand and bid me God-speed. It is the only way."

" I cannot do it ! " he cried hoarsely. " I cannot part with you. You have grown into my life. Anna——"

Again she stopped him, but this time it was not so easy. The man's passion became almost unbearable at the thought of losing her. And yet, as she rose slowly to her feet and stood looking at him with outstretched hands, a strange mixture of expressions shining in her wonderful eyes, he realized in some measure the strength of her determination, felt the utter impotence of anything which he could say to her. He forgot for the moment his own self-pity, the egotism of his own passionate love. He took her hands firmly in his and raised them to his lips.

" You shall go," he declared. " I will make of the days and weeks one long morning, but remember the afternoon must come. Always remember that."

Her hands fell to her side. She remained for a few moments standing as though listening to his retreating footsteps. Then she turned, and entering the inner room, commenced to dress hastily for the street.

CHAPTER VI

A QUESTION OF IDENTIFICATION

THE little man with the closely-cropped beard and hair looked at her keenly through his gold eyeglasses. He sat before a desk littered all over with papers and official looking documents. The walls of the room were lined with shelves, on which were glass jars, retorts, countless bottles and many appliances of surgical science. A skeleton was propped against the mantelpiece. The atmosphere seemed heavy with the odour of drugs.

"You are Mademoiselle Pellissier?" he asked, without rising to his feet.

Anna admitted the fact.

"We sent for you several hours ago," he remarked.

"I came directly I was disengaged," Anna answered. "In any case, there is probably some mistake. I have very few friends in Paris."

He referred to a sheet of paper by his side.

"Your name and address were upon an envelope found in the pocket of an Englishman who was brought here late last night suffering from serious injuries," he said in a dry official tone. "As it is doubtful whether the man will live, we should be glad if you would identify him."

"It is most unlikely that I shall be able to do so,"

Anna answered. " To the best of my belief, I have not a single English acquaintance in the city."

" My dear young lady," the official said irritably, " this man would not have your name and address in his pocket without an object. You cannot tell whether you know him or not until you have seen him. Be so good as to come this way."

With a little shrug of the shoulders Anna followed him. They ascended by a lift to one of the upper floors, passed through a long ward, and finally came to a bed in the extreme corner, round which a screen had been arranged. A nurse came hurrying up.

" He is quiet only this minute," she said to the official. " All the time he is shouting and muttering. If this is the young lady, she can perhaps calm him."

Anna stepped to the foot of the bed. An electric light flashed out from the wall. The face of the man who lay there was clearly visible. Anna merely glanced at the coarse, flushed features, and at once shook her head.

" I have never seen him in my life," she said to the official. " I have not the least idea who he is."

Just then the man's eyes opened. He saw the girl, and sprang up in bed.

" Annabel at last," he shouted. " Where have you been ? All these hours I have been calling for you. Annabel, I was lying. Who says that I am not Meysey Hill ? I was trying to scare you. See, it is on my cards—M. Hill, Meysey Hill. Don't touch the handle, Annabel ! Curse the thing, you've jammed it now. Do you want to kill us both ? Stop the thing. Stop it ! "

Anna stepped back bewildered, but the man held out his arms to her.

"I tell you it was a lie!" he shouted wildly. "Can't you believe me? I am Meysey Hill. I am the richest man in England. I am the richest man in the world. You love money. You know you do, Annabel. Never mind, I've got plenty. We'll go to the shops. Diamonds! You shall have all that you can carry away, sacksful if you like. Pearls too! I mean it. I tell you I'm Meysey Hill, the railway man. Don't leave me. Don't leave me in this beastly thing. Annabel! Annabel!"

His voice became a shriek. In response to an almost imperative gesture from the nurse, Anna laid her hand upon his. He fell back upon the pillows with a little moan, clutching the slim white fingers fiercely. In a moment his grasp grew weaker. The perspiration stood out upon his forehead. His eyes closed.

Anna stepped back at once with a little gasp of relief. The hand which the man had been holding hung limp and nerveless at her side. She held it away from her with an instinctive repulsion, born of her unconquerable antipathy to the touch of strangers. She began rubbing it with her pocket-handkerchief. The man himself was not a pleasant object. Part of his head was swathed in linen bandages. Such of his features as were visible were of coarse mould. His eyes were set too close together. Anna turned deliberately away from the bedside. She followed the official back into his room.

"Well?" he asked her tersely.

"I can only repeat what I said before," she declared. "To the best of my belief, I have never seen the man in my life."

"But he recognized you," the official objected.



"'I TELL YOU IT WAS A LIE!' HE SHOUTED WILDLY."

Among the Adventurers. [*Page* 5.

"He fancied that he did," she corrected him coolly. "I suppose delusions are not uncommon to patients in his condition."

The official frowned.

"Your name and address in his pocket was no delusion," he said sharply. "I do not wish to make impertinent inquiries into your private life. Nothing is of any concern of ours except the discovery of the man's identity. He was picked up from amongst the wreckage of a broken motor on the road to Versailles last night, and we have information that a lady was with him only a few minutes before the accident occurred."

"You are very unbelieving," Anna said coldly. "I hope you will not compel me to say again that I do not know the man's name, nor, to the best of my belief, have I ever seen him before in my life."

The official shrugged his shoulders.

"You decline to help us in any way, then," he said. "Remember that the man will probably die. He had little money about him, and unless friends come to his aid he must be treated as a pauper."

"I do not wish to seem unfeeling," Anna said, slowly, "but I can only repeat that I am absolutely without concern in the matter. The man is a stranger to me."

The official had no more to say. Only it was with a further and most unbelieving shrug of the shoulders that he resumed his seat.

"You will be so good as to leave us your correct name and address, mademoiselle," he said curtly.

"You have them both," Anna answered.

He opened the door for her with a faint disagreeable smile.

"It is possible, mademoiselle," he said, "that

this affair is not yet ended. It may yet bring us together again."

She passed out without reply. Yet she took with her an uneasy consciousness that in this affair might lie the germs of future trouble.

As she crossed the square, almost within a stone's throw of her lodgings, she came face to face with Courtlaw. He stopped short with a little exclamation of surprise.

"My dear friend," she laughed, "not so tragic, if you please."

He recovered himself.

"I was surprised, I admit," he said. "You did not tell me that you were going out, or I would have offered my escort. Do you know how late it is?"

She nodded.

"I heard the clock strike as I crossed the square," she answered. "I was sent for to go to the Hospital St. Denis. But what are you doing here?"

"Old Père Runeval met me on your doorstep, and he would not let me go. I have been sitting with him ever since. The Hospital St. Denis, did you say? I hope that no one of our friends has met with an accident."

She shook her head.

"They wanted me to identify some one whom I had certainly never seen before in my life, and to tell you the truth, they were positively rude to me because I could not. Have you ever heard the name of Meysey Hill?"

"Meysey Hill?" He repeated it after her, and she knew at once from his tone and his quick glance into her face that the name possessed some significance for him.

"Yes, I have heard of him, and I know him by

sight," he admitted. "He was a friend of your sister's, was he not?"

"I never heard her mention his name," she answered. "Still, of course, it is possible. This man was apparently not sure whether he was Meysey Hill or not."

"How long had he been in the hospital?" Courtlaw asked.

"Since last night."

"Then, whoever he may be, he is not Meysey Hill," Courtlaw said. "That young man was giving a luncheon party to a dozen friends at the Café de Paris to-day. I sat within a few feet of him. I feel almost inclined to regret the fact."

"Why?" she asked.

"If one half of the stories about Meysey Hill are true," he answered, "I would not stretch out my little finger to save his life."

"Isn't that a little extreme?"

"I am an extreme person at times. This man has an evil reputation. I know of scandalous deeds which he has done."

Anna had reached the house where she lodged, but she hesitated on the doorstep.

"Have you ever seen Annabel with him?" she asked.

"Never."

"It is odd that this man at the hospital should call himself Meysey Hill," she remarked.

"If you wish," he said, "I will go there in the morning and see what can be done for him."

"It would be very kind of you," she declared. "I am only sorry that I did not ask you to go with me."

She rang the bell, and he waited by her side until

she was admitted to the tall, gloomy lodging-house. And ever after it struck him that her backward smile as she disappeared was charged with some special significance. The door closed upon her, and he moved reluctantly away. When next he asked for her, some twelve hours later, he was told that Mademoiselle had left. His most eager inquiries and most lavish bribes could gain no further information than that she had left for England, and that her address was—London.

CHAPTER VII

MISS PELLISSIER'S SUSPICIONS

"ANNA!"

Anna kissed her sister and nodded to her aunt. Then she sat down—uninvited—and looked from one to the other curiously. There was something about their greeting and the tone of Annabel's exclamation which puzzled her.

"I wish," she said, "that you would leave off looking at me as though I were something grisly. I am your very dutiful niece, aunt, and your most devoted sister, Annabel. I haven't murdered any one, or broken the law in any way that I know of. Perhaps you will explain the state of panic into which I seem to have thrown you."

Annabel, who was looking very well, and who was most becomingly dressed, moved to a seat from which she could command a view of the road outside. She was the first to recover herself. Her aunt, a faded, anæmic-looking lady of somewhat too obtrusive gentility, was still sitting with her hand pressed to her heart.

Annabel looked up and down the empty street, and then turned to her sister.

"For one thing, Anna," she remarked, "we had not the slightest idea that you had left, or were

leaving Paris. You did not say a word about it last week, nor have you written. It is quite a descent from the clouds, isn't it ? "

" I will accept that," Anna said, " as accounting for the surprise. Perhaps you will now explain the alarm."

Miss Pellissier was beginning to recover herself. She too at once developed an anxious interest in the street outside.

" I am sure, Anna," she said, " I do not see why we should conceal the truth from you. We are expecting a visit from Sir John Ferringhall at any moment. He is coming here to tea."

" Well ? " Anna remarked calmly.

" Sir John," her aunt repeated, with thin emphasis, " is coming to see your sister."

Anna drummed impatiently with her fingers against the arm of her chair.

" Well ! " she declared good-humouredly. " I shan't eat him."

Miss Pellissier stiffened visibly.

" This is not a matter altogether for levity, Anna," she said. " Your sister's future is at stake. I imagine that even you must realize that this is of some importance."

Anna glanced towards her sister, but the latter avoided her eyes.

" I have always," she admitted calmly, " taken a certain amount of interest in Annabel's future. I should like to know how it is concerned with Sir John Ferringhall, and how my presence intervenes."

" Sir John," Miss Pellissier said impressively, " has asked your sister to be his wife. It is a most wonderful piece of good fortune, as I suppose you

will be prepared to admit. The Ferringhalls are of course without any pretence at family, but Sir John is a very rich man, and will be able to give Annabel a very enviable position in the world. The settlements which he has spoken of, too, are most munificent. No wonder we are anxious that nothing should happen to make him change his mind."

"I still——"

Anna stopped short. Suddenly she understood. She grew perhaps a shade paler, and she glanced out into the street, where her four-wheeler cab, laden with luggage, was still waiting.

"Sir John of course disapproves of me," she remarked slowly.

"Sir John is a man of the world," her aunt answered coldly. "He naturally does not wish for connexions which are—I do not wish to hurt your feelings, Anna, but I must say it—not altogether desirable."

The irrepressible smile curved Anna's lips. She glanced towards her sister, and curiously enough found in her face some faint reflection of her own rather sombre mirth. She leaned back in her chair. It was no use. The smile had become a laugh. She laughed till the tears stood in her eyes.

"I had a visit from Sir John in my rooms," she said. "Did he tell you, Annabel?"

"Yes."

"He mentioned the matter to me also," Miss Pellissier remarked stiffly. "The visit seems to have made a most painful impression upon him. To tell you the truth, he spoke to me very seriously upon the subject."

Anna sprang up.

"I will be off," she declared. "My cab with all

that luggage would give the whole show away. Good-bye, aunt."

Miss Pellissier tried ineffectually to conceal her relief.

"I do not like to seem inhospitable, Anna," she said hesitatingly. "And of course you are my niece just as Annabel is, although I am sorry to learn that your conduct has been much less discreet than hers. But at the same time, I must say plainly that I think your presence here just now would be a great misfortune. I wish very much that you had written before leaving Paris."

Anna nodded.

"Quite right," she said. "I ought to have done. Good-bye, aunt. I'll come and see you again later on. Annabel, come to the door with me," she added a little abruptly. "There is something which I must say to you."

Annabel rose and followed her sister from the room. A maid-servant held the front door open. Anna sent her away.

"Annabel," she said brusquely. "Listen to me."

"Well?"

"Sir John came to me—that you know—and you can guess what I told him. No, never mind about thanking me. I want to ask you a plain question, and you must answer me faithfully. Is all that folly done with—for ever?"

Annabel shivered ever so slightly.

"Of course it is, Anna. You ought to know that. I am going to make a fresh start."

"Be very sure that you do," Anna said slowly. "If I thought for a moment that there was any chance of a relapse, I should stop here and tell him the truth even now."



"IS ALL THIS FOLLY DONE WITH—FOREVER?"

[illegible], the Adventuress.] *[Page [illegible].*

Annabel looked at her with terrified eyes.

"Anna," she cried, "you must believe me. I am really in earnest. I would not have him know—now—for the world."

"Very well," Anna said. "I will believe you. Remember that he's not at all a bad sort, and to speak frankly, he's your salvation. Try and let him never regret it. There's plenty to be got out of life in a decent sort of way. Be a good wife to him. You can if you will."

"I promise," Annabel declared. "He is very kind, Anna, really, and not half such a prig as he seems."

Anna moved towards the door, but her sister detained her.

"Won't you tell me why you have come to England?" she said. "It was such a surprise to see you. I thought that you loved Paris and your work so much."

A momentary bitterness crept into Anna's tone.

"I have made no progress with my work," she said slowly, "and the money was gone. I had to ask Mr. Courtlaw for his true verdict, and he gave it me. I have given up painting."

"Anna!"

"It is true, dear. After all there are other things. All that I regret are the wasted years, and I am not sure that I regret them. Only of course I must begin something else at once. That is why I came to London."

"But what are you going to do—where are you going to live?" Annabel asked. "Have you any money?"

"Lots," Anna answered laconically. "Never

mind me. I always fall on my feet, you know."

"You will let us hear from you—let us know where you are, very soon?" Annabel called out from the step.

Anna nodded as she briskly crossed the pavement.

"Some day," she answered. "Run in now. There's a hansom coming round the corner."

Annabel disappeared precipitately. Miss Pellissier was standing at the window of her little drawing-room when her niece entered, watching the departing cab, and dabbing her eyes with a lavender perfumed handkerchief.

"She never looked back once, Annabel, not once," she exclaimed. "I waved my hand, too. Really, it is most unfortunate that she should have come to London just now. It is evident too that she intended to stay here. Of course it was quite impossible, with Sir John here so often, and feeling as he does about her. Did she tell you her plans, Annabel?"

The girl shook her head.

"I'm afraid she hasn't any. All the same I don't think that we need worry about her, aunt. Anna always falls upon her feet. I never knew any one so capable of looking after herself."

Miss Pellissier glanced at her niece with unaccustomed sharpness.

"I am afraid, Annabel," she said, "that you are inclined to be a selfish young woman."

Annabel shrugged her shoulders.

"I do not think that I am selfish in an ordinary way," she answered. "I simply do not worry about things. It really is not worth while, and it

makes one old and irritable. I would rather have *Anna here—as she has to be in London—but as it is* not possible I simply do not think about it. I suppose you are going to have a really enjoyable hour now, thinking how many scrapes she can possibly get into. Every one to their taste, of course. It simply wouldn't suit me."

"If it is not selfishness it is just sheer heartlessness with you, Annabel," Miss Pellissier declared. "I wish that Anna had left an address. I must confess that I am uneasy about her. She was always your father's favourite. After all, of you two girls——"

She stopped short, looking at Annabel with a sudden keenness.

"Well, aunt ?"

Miss Pellissier did not finish her sentence then, or at any other time. Nevertheless from that moment she was plagued with a constantly recurring suspicion which she was never able altogether to quiet. It was not a suspicion which she would have cared to share with Sir John Ferringhall, and it was connected with that curious change of names between the two girls which she had accepted but never understood.

* * * * *

Anna sat back in her cab, but found it remain stationary.

"Gracious !" she exclaimed to herself. "I don't know where to go to."

The cabman, knocking with the butt end of his whip upon the window, reminded her that he was in a similar predicament.

"Drive towards St. Pancras," she directed, promptly. "I will tell you when to stop."

The cab rumbled off. Anna leaned forward, watching the people in the streets. It was then for the first time she remembered that she had said nothing to her sister of the man in the hospital.

CHAPTER VIII

WHITE'S"

NORTHWARDS, away from the inhospitality of West Kensington, rumbled the ancient four-wheel cab, laden with luggage and drawn by a wheezy old horse rapidly approaching its last days. Inside was Anna, leaning a little forward to watch the passers by, bright-eyed, full to the brim of the insatiable curiosity of youth—the desire to understand and appreciate this new world in which she found herself. She was practically an outcast, she had not even the ghost of a plan as to her future, and she had something less than five pounds in her pocket. She watched the people and hummed softly to herself.

Suddenly she thrust her head out of the window.

"Please stop, cabman," she ordered.

The man pulled up. It was not a difficult affair.

"Is this Montague Street, W.C. ?" she asked.

The man looked as though he would have liked to deny it, but could not.

"Stay where you are for a moment," she directed. "I want to find an address."

The man contented himself with a nod. Anna rummaged about in her dressing-case, and finally drew out a letter. On the envelope was written—

Sydney Courtlaw, Esq.,
13, Montague St.

She put her head out of the window.

"Number 13, please, cabman."

"We've come past it, miss," the man answered, with a note of finality in his gruff voice.

"Then turn round and go back there," she directed.

The man muttered something inaudible, and gathered up the reins. His horse, which had apparently gone to sleep, preferred to remain where he was. After a certain amount of manœuvring, however, he was induced to crawl around, and in a few minutes came to a stop again before a tall brightly-painted house, which seemed like an oasis of colour and assertive prosperity in a long dingy row. This was number 13, Montague Street, familiarly spoken of in the neighbourhood as "White's."

Anna promptly alighted with the letter in her hand. The door was opened for her by a weary-looking youth in a striped jacket several sizes too large for him. The rest of his attire was nondescript.

"Does Mr. Courtlaw, Mr. Sydney Courtlaw, live here, please?" Anna asked him.

"Not home yet, miss," the young man replied. "Generally gets here about seven."

Anna hesitated, and then held out the letter.

"I think that I will leave this letter for him," she said. "It is from his brother in Paris. Say that I will call again or let him know my address in London."

The young man accepted the letter and the message, and seemed about to close the door when

a lady issued from one of the front rooms and intervened. She wore a black satin dress, a little shiny at the seams, a purposeless bow of white tulle at the back of her neck, and a huge chatelaine. She addressed Anna with a beaming smile and a very creditable mixture of condescension and officiousness. Under the somewhat trying incandescent light her cheeks pleaded guilty to a recent use of the powder puff.

"I think that you were inquiring for Mr. Courtlaw," she remarked. "He is one of our guests—perhaps I should say boarders here, but he seldom returns before dinner-time. We dine at seven-thirty. Can I give him any message for you?"

"Thank you," Anna answered. "I have a letter for him from his brother, which I was just leaving."

"I will see that he gets it immediately on his return," the lady promised. "You did not wish to see him particularly this evening, then?"

Anna hesitated.

"Well, no," she answered, "To tell you the truth though, I am quite a stranger in London, and it occurred to me that Mr. Courtlaw might have been able to give me an idea where to stop."

The lady in black satin looked at the pile of luggage outside and hesitated.

"Were you thinking of private apartments, a boarding-house or an hotel?" she asked.

"I really had not thought about it at all," Anna answered smiling. "I expected to stay with a relation, but I found that their arrangements did not allow of it. I have been used to living in apartments in Paris, but I suppose the system is different here."

The lady in black satin appeared undecided. She looked from Anna, who was far too nice-looking to be travelling about alone, to that reassuring pile of luggage, and wrinkled her brows thoughtfully.

"Of course," she said diffidently, "this is a boarding-house, although we never take in promiscuous travellers. The class of guests we have are all permanent, and I am obliged to be very careful indeed. But—if you are a friend of Mr. Courtlaw's—I should like to oblige Mr. Courtlaw."

"It is very nice of you to think of it," Anna said briskly. "I should really like to find somewhere to stay, if it was only for a few nights."

The lady stood away from the door.

"Will you come this way," she said, "into the drawing-room? There is no one there just now. Most of my people are upstairs dressing for dinner. The gentlemen are so particular now, and a good thing too, I say. I was always used to it, and I think it gives quite a tone to an establishment. Please sit down, Miss—dear me, I haven't asked you your name yet."

"My name is Pellissier," Anna said, "Anna Pellissier."

"I am Mrs. White," the lady in black satin remarked. "It makes one feel quite awkward to mention such a thing, but after all I think that it is best for both parties. Could you give me any references?"

"There is Mr. Courtlaw," Anna said, "and my solicitors, Messrs. Le Mercier and Stowe of St. Heliers. They are rather a long way off, but you could write to them. I am sorry that I do not know any one in London. But after all, Mrs. White, I am not at all sure that I could afford to come to you.

I am shockingly poor. Please tell me what your terms are."

"Well," Mrs. White said slowly, "it depends a good deal upon what room you have. Just now my best ones are all taken."

"So much the better," Anna declared cheerfully. "The smallest will do for me quite well."

Mrs. White looked mysteriously about the room as though to be sure that no one was listening.

"I should like you to come here," she said. "It's a great deal for a young lady who's alone in the world, as I suppose you are at present, to have a respectable home, and I do not think in such a case that private apartments are at all desirable. We have a very nice set of young people here too just at present, and you would soon make some friends. I will take you for thirty-five shillings a week. Please don't let any one know that."

"I have no idea what it costs to live in London," Anna said, "but I should like very much to come for a short time if I might."

"Certainly," Mrs. White said. "Two days' notice shall be sufficient on either side."

"And I may bring my luggage in and send that cabman away?" Anna asked. "Dear me, what a relief! If I had had any nerves that man would have trampled upon them long ago."

"Cabmen are so trying," Mrs. White assented. "You need have no further trouble. The man-servant shall bring your trunks in and pay the fare too, if you like."

Anna drew out her purse at once.

"You are really a good Samaritan," she declared. "I am perfectly certain that that man meant to be

rude to me. He has been bottling it up all the way from West Kensington."

Mrs. White rang the bell.

"Come upstairs," she said, "and I will show you your room. And would you mind hurrying a little. You won't want to be late the first evening, and it's ten minutes past seven now. Gracious, there's the gong. This way, my dear—and—you'll excuse my mentioning it, but a quiet blouse and a little chiffon, you know, will be quite sufficient. It's your first evening, and early impressions do count for so much. You understand me, I'm sure."

Anna was a little puzzled, but she only laughed.

"Perhaps, as I've only just arrived," she remarked, "I might be forgiven if I do not change my skirt. I packed so hurriedly that it will take me a long time to find my things."

"Certainly," Mrs. White assured her. "Certainly. I'll mention it. You're tired, of course. This is your room. The gong will go at seven-thirty. Don't be late if you can help it."

* * * * *

Anna was not late, but her heart sank within her when she entered the drawing-room. It was not a hopeful looking group. Two or three podgy-looking old men with wives to match, half-a-dozen over-dressed girls, and a couple of underdressed American ones, who still wore the clothes in which they had been tramping half over London since breakfast time. A sprinkling of callow youths, and a couple of pronounced young Jews, who were talking loudly together in some unintelligible jargon of the City. What had she do with such as these? She had hard work to keep a smiling face, as Mrs. White, who had risen to greet her, proceeded with a formal,

and from Anna's point of view, a wholly unnecessary round of introductions. And then suddenly—a relief. A young man—almost a boy, slight, dark, and with his brother's deep grey eyes — came across the room to her.

"You must be the Miss Pellissier of whom David has told me so much," he said, shyly. "I am very glad that you have come here. I heard from David about you only this morning."

"You are marvellously like your brother," Anna said, beaming upon him. "I have a letter for you, and no end of messages. Where can we sit down and talk?"

He led her across the room towards a window recess, in which a tall, fair young man was seated with an evening paper in his hand.

"Let me introduce my friend to you," Courtlaw said. "Arthur, this is Miss Pellissier—Mr. Brendon. Brendon and I are great chums," he went on nervously. "I don't think that the rest of the people here like us very well, do they, Arthur, so we're obliged to be friends."

Anna shook hands with Brendon—a young man also, but older and more self-possessed than Sydney Courtlaw.

"Sydney is quite right, Miss Pellissier," he said. "He and I don't seem to get on at all with our fellow-guests, as Mrs. White calls them. You really ought not to stay here and talk to us. It is a most inauspicious start for you."

"Dear me," Anna laughed, "how unfortunate! What ought I to do? Should I be forgiven, do you think, if I were to go and hold that skein of wool for the old lady in the yellow cap?"

"Don't speak of her irreverently," Brendon said,

in an awed whisper. "Her husband was a county *councillor, and she has a niece who comes to see her* in a carriage. I wish she wouldn't look like that at us over her glasses."

Horace, the manservant, transformed now into the semblance of a correctly garbed waiter, threw open the door.

"Dinner is served, ma'am," he announced to Mrs. White.

There was no rush. Everything was done in a genteel and ordinary way, but on the other hand, there was no lingering. Anna found herself next Sydney Courtlaw, with his friend close at hand. Opposite to her was a sallow-visaged young man, whose small tie seemed like a smudge of obtrusively shiny black across the front of a high close-drawn collar. As a rule, Courtlaw told her softly, he talked right and left, and to everybody throughout the whole of the meal—to-night he was almost silent, and seemed to devote his whole attention to staring at Anna. After the first courses however she scarcely noticed him. Her two new friends did their best to entertain her.

"I can't imagine, Miss Pellissier," Brendon said, leaning towards her, "whatever made you think of coming to stay if only for a week at a Montague Street boarding-house. Are you going to write a novel?"

"Not I," she answered gaily. "I came to London unexpectedly, and my friends could not take me in. I had a vague sort of idea that this was the region where one finds apartments, so I told my cabman to drive in this direction while I sat inside his vehicle and endeavoured to form a plan of campaign. He brought me past this house, and I thought

I would call and leave your brother's letter. Then I saw Mrs. White——"

"No more," Sydney Courtlaw begged, laughingly. "You were booked of course. An unexpected vacancy, wasn't it? Every one comes in on unexpected vacancy."

"And they go?"

"When they get the chance. It really isn't so easy to go as it seems. We have come to the conclusion, Brendon and I, that Mrs. White is psychologically gifted. She throws a sort of spell over us all. We struggle against it at first, but in the end we have to submit. She calls us her guests, but in reality we are her prisoners. We simply can't get away. There's that old gentleman at the end of the table—Bullding his name is. He will tell you confidentially that he simply hates the place. Yet he's been here for six years, and he's as much a fixture as that sham mahogany sideboard. Everyone will grumble to you confidentially—Miss Ellicot, she's our swagger young lady, you know—up there, next Miss White, she will tell you that it is so out of the world here, so far away from every one one knows. Old Kesterton, choleric-looking individual nearly opposite, will curse the cooking till he's black in the face, but he never misses a dinner. The Semitic looking young man opposite, who seems to have been committing you to memory piecemeal, will tell you that he was never so bored in all his life as he has been here. Yet he stays. They all stay!"

"And you yourself?"

Brendon laughed.

"Oh, we are also under the spell," he declared, "but I think that we are here mainly because it is

cheap. It is really cheap, you know. To appreciate it you should try rooms."

"Is this a fair sample of the dinner?" Anna asked, who had the healthy appetite of a strong young woman.

"It is, if anything, a little above the average," Brendon admitted.

Anna said nothing. The young man opposite was straining his ears to listen to their conversation. Mrs. White caught her eye, and smiled benignly down the table.

"I hope that Mr. Courtlaw is looking after you. Miss Pellissier," she said.

"Admirably, thank you," Anna answered.

The young lady with frizzled hair, whom Brendon had pointed out to her as Miss Ellicot, leaned forward from her hostess's side. She had very frizzy hair indeed, very black eyebrows, a profusion of metallic adornments about her neck and waist, and an engaging smile.

"We are so interested to hear, Miss Pellissier," she said, "that you have been living in Paris. We shall expect you to tell us all what to wear."

Anna smiled very faintly, and shook her head.

"I have come from a very unfashionable quarter," she said, "and I do not think that I have been inside a milliner's shop for a year. Besides, it is all reversed now, you know. Paris copies London."

Brendon leaned over confidentially.

"You are in luck, Miss Pellissier," he declared. "Your success here is absolutely meteoric. Miss Ellicot has spoken to you, the great Mr. Bullding is going to. For five minutes he has been trying to

think of something to say. I am not sure, but I believe that he has just thought of something."

" May I be prepared ? " Anna asked. " Which is Mr. Bullding ? "

" Stout old gentleman four places down on the left. Look out, it's coming."

Anna raised her eyes, and caught the earnest gaze of an elderly gentleman with a double chin, a protuberant under lip, and a snuff-stained coat.

" I was in Paris four years ago," Mr. Bullding announced solemnly. " It rained the whole of the time, but we saw all the sights, and the place never seemed dull."

" It takes a great deal of bad weather to depress the true Parisian," Anna admitted.

" A volatile temperament—yes, a volatile temperament," Mr. Bullding repeated, rather struck with the phrase. " It is a pity that as nations we are not more friendly."

Anna nodded and turned again to Courtlaw.

" I will not be drawn into a conversation with Mr. Bullding," she declared. " I believe that he would bore me. Tell me, what are these bananas and nuts for ? "

" Dessert."

Anna laid down her serviette.

" Let us escape," she said. " Couldn't we three go out and have some coffee somewhere ? The thought of that drawing-room paralyses me."

Brendon laughed softly.

" We can," he said, " and we will. But it is only fair to warn you that it isn't expected. Mrs. White is proud of her drawing-room evenings. There is a musical programme, and we have the windows open and blinds up, and a pink lamp shade over the piano

lamp—a sort of advertisement of the place, you know. Strangers look in and long, and neighbours are moved to envy."

Anna hesitated no longer. She almost sprang to her feet. Conscious of Mrs. White's surprise as she swung easily down the room, followed by the two young men, she smiled a careless explanation at her.

"I am dying to renew my acquaintance with London, Mrs. White," she remarked.

"You are not going out—this evening, I trust," that lady asked, a trifle dismayed.

Anna did not pause, but she looked over her shoulder with slightly lifted eyebrows.

"Why not? They tell me that London is impossible till after ten, and I want my first impressions to be favourable."

"There will be some coffee and music in the drawing-room in a few minutes," Mrs. White said.

"Thanks, I'm not very fond of coffee," Anna answered, "and I hate music. Good-night."

Mrs. White gasped, and then stiffened. Miss Ellicot, who sang ballads, and liked Brendon to turn over the pages for her, tossed her head. Anna passed serenely out.

CHAPTER IX

SOME CONFIDENCES AND A SUPPER

THEY found their way to a music-hall. Seated high up near the ceiling—she had insisted upon cheap places—Anna, whose appetite for fresh things was as the appetite of a child, infected her two escorts with something of her own gaiety. Even on that first night she saw many things which moved her to wonder.

"Will you tell me," she exclaimed, leaning forward and touching Brendon upon the arm. "Why do not the people laugh? They have finished their day's work—this is their relaxation. Why do they not talk to one another and be happy? Look along this row, and that, and that," she exclaimed, motioning with her hand. "Is it a matter of conscience or digestion, or what?"

"Of temperament only," Brendon assured her. "Englishmen are proverbial, you know, for taking their pleasures sadly."

"Sadly! What a hideous philosophy. We shall become a nation of dyspeptics. How can an artist sing or dance to such a wooden wall? Ah!"

Her eyes twinkled with fun. She was leaning over and looking into the stalls. Sir John, white gloved, white waistcoated, curled and *debonnair*, was whispering into Annabel's ear, whilst Miss Pellissier on the

next seat affected to be absorbed in her programme.

"Oh, this is funny," Anna murmured. "I am so glad we came here."

"Do tell us the joke," Sydney Courtlaw begged.

She shook her head regretfully.

"It is too bad," she declared. "I cannot! But you must tell me this. Is it supposed in this dear, hypocritical old city to be quite respectable to be in the two shilling places at the Empire?"

Brendon smiled.

"I am not sure," he said, "that this is not the most respectable part in the house. Certainly we could give points to the stalls."

Anna sighed. She seemed disappointed.

"All the same," she murmured to herself, "I wish that Sir John could see us."

Afterwards she insisted upon supper, and on being hostess.

"Somewhere ridiculously cheap," she said, briskly. "Somewhere where there are a great many people to be seen."

They took her to Frascati's, protesting firmly all the way against being her guests. But she was firm.

"After to-night," she declared, "we will all share up. It is the only possible way, if you will bring me out with you sometimes. But to-night—no! I must be hostess. I have the whim for it. Mrs. White has started all the quicksilver in me, somehow. What a dinner—and what people!"

"You will never stay there," they both declared, in despair.

"Oh, I am not so sure," she answered cheerfully. "One can amuse oneself anywhere, and if you two are nice to me—who knows? I am enjoying this

evening immensely, but if I do not hear one real laugh at supper-time I shall have hysterics. What do they do with their spirits, these people? Do they bottle them up? They talk—their lips seem to be moving always, but their faces are dead."

Wherever they went Anna attracted attention. Her unusual beauty, the distinction of her quiet clothes and elegant carriage, the Madonna-like calm of her features, broken up every now and then by the restless fire of her lips and eyes, seemed to turn people's heads towards her in the street, the theatre and the restaurant. And withal she was possessed of the most sublime unconsciousness. She seemed positively ignorant of the fact that she was in any way distinguished from the crowd. But when they were seated in the restaurant she certainly gazed about her with something akin to wonder.

"But what manner of people are these?" she asked. "Where do they come from? Have they been dug out of the country places? Are they really Londoners?"

"Nine-tenths of them," Brendon answered. "Perhaps more. But you must remember that this is a cheap place."

"Of course. It is what I wanted. I wanted to see the small shopkeeper and his wife, the working girls and their beaux—the lower middle classes."

"They are here," Brendon answered. "You can pick them out easily enough. They are jumbled up with the flotsam from the streets, and they probably feel for an hour or two that they are leading terrible lives."

"And the artists?" Anna asked. "Where do they go to? Where is their quarter?"

Brendon laughed.

"I think," he said, "that our artists are like our soldiers—they loathe the signs of their calling, and come out always in mufti. You find the successful ones at the smart restaurants, the mediocre ones at the artists' clubs, and the failures on the streets. They are not to be distinguished as in Paris. They form no society of their own. They take their place in the great world according to their social standing, and like all other Englishmen they aim in their clothing and speech and deportment at the great Negative manner."

"Which means," Sydney remarked, "the deletion of all individuality. It is good for the hairdresser."

"Dear me," Anna murmured. "What a lot I am learning about my countrypeople! Now tell me, please, if I am not too inquisitive. What do you two boys do? You work, I suppose?"

"Thank you, Miss Pellissier," Brendon remarked. "It is a good many years since I have been called a boy. I am a clerk in a bank, if you know what that is."

"I can guess," Anna answered. "I suppose it is very interesting. It sounds a little——"

"It not only sounds, but it is," Brendon interrupted, "a deadly grind."

"And Sydney?"

"I sit at the next desk," Sydney answered. "Only of course I'm Brendon's junior by a good bit. I wanted to be an artist like David, but I came to grief."

"So did I," Anna declared. "Your brother knocked all that out of me."

Sydney was incredulous.

"David doesn't often make mistakes," he said, "but——"

"He made no mistake about me," Anna declared. "I do not believe that I have even the temperament of an artist. I shall always be thankful to him for being—well—brutally frank to me. It is such a waste of time, isn't it, hammering away at something which is not one's *métier*."

Brendon sighed.

"There are very many of us," he said, "who have all our lives to be doing that sort of thing."

"If one knows it," Anna said, "there is always a means of escape."

"Some of us," Brendon answered drily, "have our livings to earn."

Anna laughed, and laughed again to herself softly. How about herself? She had barely sufficient money in her purse—in the world—to keep her for a week. Yet her face was bravely enough set towards the future. Its very difficulties were an inspiration.

"I really do not see," she said, "why one should not be able to earn one's living in a pleasant way."

"The pleasantest things in the world," Brendon answered, "become drudgery when one has to do them."

"That is all very well," Anna declared, "but surely the things which appeal most to one are the things one is likely to do best."

"It is an admirable theory," Brendon said slowly. "The pity of it is that it so seldom works out in actual life."

"Theories won't work themselves out," Anna declared lightly. "If we don't make them prove themselves, the fault is often our own, isn't it? Please ask for the bill, Sydney. I really can't call you Mr. Courtlaw, you know, after having called

your brother that for so long. This place is garish. It makes my eyes and my head ache."

They passed out into the cool streets. Anna drew a little sigh of relief.

"Ah, this is better," she exclaimed. "Don't let us hurry home. I want to look about me. Streets, streets, streets! Is there no green anywhere to rest one's eyes?"

They took her into Piccadilly and walked slowly along under the trees of the Green Park. She plied them with numberless questions. There were so many phases of life which were strange to her, so much that she wanted to understand. But in the middle of an animated conversation she suddenly stopped short upon the pavement.

They were under the portico of a celebrated restaurant, from which the people were just emerging after supper. A tall commissionaire was standing by the door of a small handsome brougham. Sir John, with Annabel and her aunt in close attendance, were crossing the pavement. It chanced that Annabel turned her head, and for a moment the eyes of the two sisters met. Sir John also looked around, and seeing Anna frowned severely. He bent down and whispered something in his companion's ear. She nodded and suffered herself to be handed into the carriage.

Both Brendon and Sydney Courtlaw plunged instantly into some alien subject of conversation. But Anna's low laugh, although not altogether mirthful, brushed away the moment of embarrassment.

"You see," she said, "I am a very black sheep indeed. My own people will have nothing to do with me."



"FOR A MOMENT THE EYES OF THE TWO SISTERS MET."

Anne the Adventuress.] [*Page* 82.

"It was your sister, of course?" Sydney remarked softly. "What a marvellous likeness!"

"Yes, it was my sister," Anna answered. "I suppose that we are very much alike."

The carriage vanished round a corner. Something which looked like a white handkerchief fluttered from the window. For a few moments Anna remained silent. Her high spirits flagged. They walked aimlessly along, the two young men glancing furtively at one another. Then with a little exclamation she recovered herself.

"Dear me, how absurd!" she exclaimed. "As if London were not large enough for both of us. Please tell me, Mr. Brendon, ought we to be out so late as this? Will Mrs. White give me notice?"

"We have latchkeys," they both assured her.

She smiled.

"Capital! Don't hurry then. I like to look around me."

So they threaded their way through the loitering groups of men and women. Anna frequently paused to look about her, often perplexed, more than once astonished.

"I do not understand these people at all," she declared. "There are none who seem really to be enjoying themselves, except those who have had too much to drink. All these others, they come from their evening's pleasure as though from hours of labour."

"The Londoner and the Parisian are as far apart as the poles," Sydney reminded her. "The Parisian hums a gay tune as he walks homewards and thinks over his evening's entertainment. The Englishman wonders how he will sleep, thinks of the morrow's

work, and reckons up how much his evening's pleasure has cost him. "

Anna shrugged her shoulders.

"Don't ask me to be patriotic, then," she remarked. "And yet you know, one feels nearer to life here. Levity fits the Parisian like a glove, his very capacity for it seems belittling. See how different it is here, what a struggle it all is to appear lighthearted. The forced smile cracks the rouge on these women's cheeks. It is hideously unnatural, one feels conscious all the time of the tragedy underneath. And the men, those who are not flushed with wine, are dull-footed, pale. They come and go like spectral figures. One feels that they are only adding to the toils of the day in this half-hearted pursuit of relaxation."

Brendon looked at her curiously.

"I wonder," he said, "is this the cynicism of the very young, or do we really seem like it to you ? "

"I am not young," Anna answered, "and I am not a cynic. If I am unjust I shall find it out very soon. I simply speak of things as I see them."

Brendon, with regret, took out his latchkey. They passed into the dimly-lit hall of the boarding-house, and Anna, after discreet good-nights, went softly upstairs. The two young men tiptoed their way into a small room at the back of the house, called by courtesy the smoking-room. Horace, roused from his slumbers, was bribed to bring them whisky.

CHAPTER X

BRENDON'S LUCK

PARIS, 15*th* ——

YOU have not kept your promise. You were to have let me know how this mad enterprise of yours prospered. Yet since you left Paris I have not had a single line from you. All that I know, I have to glean from Sydney's none too coherent letters.

I cannot picture you in a Montague Street boarding-house. Have you not begun to realize yourself that you have made a mistake? Come back here, Anna! A thousand times I have felt like biting out my tongue which sent you into such ridiculous and inappropriate exile. Come back here, and I will force the genius which is in you out of your fingers on to canvas. You took my hasty words too seriously. They were not meant to be final. Come back, or I shall fetch you. The savour has gone out of my days. I am restless, and my work wearies me. Come, and I will drag you up to success. Mind, this is a warning. I shall keep my word. It is a matter of ten hours, of half a day, a trifle! If you do not come to me, I shall come to you.

Ever your lover,
DAVID COURTLAW.

The letter dropped from her fingers. Anna was alone, and the mask of her unchanging high spirits was for the moment laid aside. She was a little paler than when she had come to London, a little paler and a little thinner. There were dark rims under her eyes, soft now with unshed tears. For this three weeks had been the hardest of her life. There had been disappointments and humiliations, and although she hated to admit it even to herself, she was in desperate straits. Nevertheless, she was still fighting. She drew pen and paper towards her, and clenched her teeth as she wrote.

DEAR FRIEND,—

What nonsense! Your words scarcely even hastened my decision. For months I had been struggling with that hideous inability to express a single coherent thing, with a dead brush and stiff fingers. In all our friendship there is nothing for which I have felt more grateful to you than when you paid me the rare compliment of telling me an unpleasant truth.

Why should you think and write of me as an outcast? Believe me, life is very amusing here. I have not finally settled which of the arts or professions shall have the honour of providing me with my daily bread, but that will come. One thing, however, I have finally decided. I have put my brushes away absolutely and inevitably, at any rate for the present. Nothing shall induce me to change my mind as regards this. Nor shall I for some time at any rate return to Paris. You know, dear friend, that neither my instincts nor my training incline towards the conventional, but when you write me as though you were in some measure the keeper of

my ways you force me to remind you of our last interview, and the answer which I gave you. You must please consider that, for the present at any rate, as final. It is enough for me to say this, is it not?

Some day I will amuse you with an account of my life here. Just now I am not in the humour for letter-writing. Sydney is a dear boy, and has been very kind to me indeed. Don't write again just yet. Letters are always a distraction as well as a solace. Just now I want to concentrate myself and my thoughts upon one thing, and one thing only.

Ever yours,

ANNA.

"And that one thing," Anna said to herself softly, as she leaned for a moment back in her chair, "is how to pay my next week's bill to Mrs. White. It ought not to be much. I have gone without dinner for three nights, and—come in."

Sydney Courtlaw followed his timid knock. Anna raised her eyebrows at the sight of him. He was in evening dress: swallow-tailed coat and white tie.

"Is this a concession to Mrs. White?" she asked, laughing. "How gratified she must have been! If only I had known I would have made an effort to get home in time for dinner."

"Not exactly," he answered nervously. "Please forgive my coming up, Miss Pellissier, but you have not been down to dinner for three nights, and—Brendon and I—we were afraid that you might be unwell."

"Never better in my life," Anna declared briskly. "I had lunch very late to-day, and I did not get home in time for dinner."

She smiled grimly at the recollection of that lunch —tea and roll at an aerated bread shop. Sydney was watching her eagerly.

"I'm glad you're all right," he said, "because we want you to do us a favour. Brendon's had an awful stroke of luck."

"I'm delighted," she exclaimed. "Do tell me all about it."

"He only heard this afternoon," Sydney continued. "An uncle in New York is dead, and has left him loads of money. A lawyer has come all the way from America about it. We want to celebrate, and we want you to help us. Brendon suggests supper at the Carlton. We meant to make it dinner and a theatre, but you were not home."

Anna shook her head dubiously.

"It is ever so nice of you to have waited," she said, "but you know the arrangement we made. Shares in everything, and ——"

"But this is an exception, surely," Sydney protested. "Besides, you insisted upon being hostess that first evening, and this is only a return. Don't disappoint Brendon. It's an awful stroke of luck for him, you know, especially as he hated the bank so, but it'll spoil it all for him if you don't come. He'll be quite hurt, too."

Anna hesitated. She was really very hungry indeed.

"You are quite sure that this is not an excuse of Mr. Brendon's? You boys have been so kind to me, and——"

"Positive," Sydney declared. "It's a dead cert. I've seen the papers, and Brendon has heaps of money already to be going on with. You'll come, won't you? We thought of starting in half an

hour's time, and try for a theatre somewhere on the way."

Anna nodded.

"Delightful!" she exclaimed. "I'll come. Run away now, please. I must see if I have a gown fit to wear."

In the drawing-room below a whisper of Brendon's good fortune had gone round. Miss Amelia Ellicot held out both her hands, and looked inexpressible things into his eyes.

"You know that I am glad," she said to him, with a most becoming mixture of modesty and effusion. "I can't tell you how glad, before all these people."

She dropped her eyes, and wandered off to a remote corner of the room, whither Brendon did not follow her. Her mother made whispered comments to Mrs. White on Milly's sensitiveness, which were easily overheard by every one in the room. Mr. Bullding, abandoning a position of portly ease upon the hearth-rug, came and patted Brendon gently on the back.

"Let me give you a word of advice, young man," he said solemnly. "You will, I presume, abandon your present occupation and enjoy a brief period of idleness. Presently that idleness will begin to pall. You will look about for something to do. Go in for public life. There is nothing more expanding, more thoroughly satisfactory, than to serve one's country in one's leisure hours. You will never regret it. I speak, as I dare say you know, from experience. For fourteen years I represented Sproxton upon the Worcestershire County Council. I have only to show myself there to-day, and I am instantly recognized. Every man and boy in the place touches his hat to me. That sort of thing is always—er—most gratifying. Of course, it is scarcely likely that you

will be able to begin your career with the County Council, that may come by-and-bye, but there are many minor offices in which you may—may serve your apprenticeship to public life. I myself started by being the overseer of an important parish."

The Semitic young gentleman, who had been hanging restlessly around during the ex-County Councillor's oration, laid his finger persuasively on Brendon's coat sleeve.

"Look here," he whispered. "You're fond of the theatre, and that sort of thing, aren't you? If you care for a little flutter in a new production—there's a gold mine in the piece, s'help me. I believe I could get you a fifth share. It's a comic opera, with some ripping songs and dances, bound to take like wildfire. Of course it means going behind whenever you like, and you stand O.K. with all the girls. Friend of mine in the City's running the syndicate. What do you say? Will you come down and see him?"

"I'll think about it," Brendon declared. "I fancy it's scarcely in my line."

"But it's a real good thing," the young man urged. "I wouldn't mention it except for your being one of us here. It's a real bit of all right. I don't mind telling you I've money in it myself, and it's got to go, sure as my name's Gudden."

Brendon detached himself good-humouredly. Mrs. White beckoned him to her side.

"I suppose, Mr. Brendon," she said, looking up at him with an engaging smile, "that we shall lose you now."

"Not just at present, I think," Brendon answered. "It will take several months to settle things up, and then I may have to go to America."

Mrs. White nodded.

" It will be very nice if you stay with us till then," she said. " I am sure we shall all be sorry when you go. How smart you and Mr. Courtlaw look this evening!" she added. " I suppose you are off to celebrate somewhere ? "

" We are going out to supper," Brendon answered. " I am only sorry we can't take the whole lot of you," he added pleasantly.

" How nice of you!" Mrs. White murmured.

" Eighteen would be rather too many, wouldn't it ? " Miss Ellicot remarked, with a little conscious smile. " I think that supper parties are such fun."

" We thought of going to the Carlton," Brendon said.

" Oh ! " Miss Ellicot's interjection was long drawn and expressive. " How perfectly lovely! It's the one place in the world I am dying to see. Do look around at all the people and the dresses, and find out who is there, and describe it all to us poor stay-at-homes to-morrow. Oh ! "

This second interjection was of a different character. Anna stood upon the threshold buttoning her gloves, and something very like sensation rippled from one to the other. They had none of them seen Anna in evening dress. They had probably never been in the same room with a black gown fashioned by an expert Parisian dressmaker. She wore no jewels. Her neck and arms were bare. Her wonderful brown hair, curving low over her forehead, was drawn back with a grace which a professional coiffeur could scarcely have matched. Even her pallor seemed to add to that marvellous distinction of presence, so subtle and yet so unmistakable a gift. The women felt suddenly tawdry and old-fashioned. Miss

Ellicot lost all faith in the blouse which a few moments ago had given her every satisfaction, and as for her ornaments, she could have torn them from her neck and arms and thrown them into the fire-place. She went slowly red and then pale. She had lost her place at 13, Montague Street. She was wholly and entirely eclipsed. There was not a male pair of eyes in the place which were not shining with admiration.

Anna, utterly unconscious, or at any rate indifferent to the sensation which she had evoked, came a little further into the room.

"Mr. Brendon is going to take us to the Carlton," she remarked pleasantly to Mrs. White. "Isn't it nice of him ?"

"Very," Mrs. White answered, with some reserve. "Are you sure that you won't catch cold with nothing on your shoulders."

"Well, I shall have to risk it," Anna declared, with a soft little laugh. "I don't possess an opera-cloak."

Miss Ellicot rose heroically.

"I will lend you mine," she said. "I don't think you ought to go out like that."

Anna, who had seen Miss Ellicot's opera cloak, stopped her.

"It is so nice of you," she said, "but I really do not need it. I have a piece of lace outside I can twist round my head and shoulders. I am quite ready now, Mr. Brendon. Good-night, everybody."

They departed, leaving behind them almost a dead silence. Mr. Gudden had done nothing but simply stare at Anna from the moment of her entrance. Even after her departure he remained looking at the door through which she had issued.

Miss Ellicot broke the spell.

"Well," she said impressively. "What there was about that dress, I can't imagine, except that it seemed more like a skin than anything, but I never saw anything look so indecent in my life."

"She looked like one of those new-fashioned posters," Mrs. White remarked, "or like one of those French women who come over to the music-halls, and drive about with mules and poodles with diamond bracelets."

Every one had something to say. Mr. Gudden alone was silent. He had removed to a distant window, and was standing there with folded arms.

"If I can't remember where I've seen her, who she is in two minutes," he murmured to himself, "I shall have fits. S'help me I shall."

CHAPTER XI

AN ENCOUNTER AT THE CARLTON

"THIS," Anna declared, as she sipped her wine and looked around her, "reminds me more of Paris than any place I have yet seen. I suppose it is the mirrors and decorations."

"And the people?" Brendon asked. "What do you think of them?"

Anna extended her critical survey and shrugged her shoulders.

"What can one say?" she exclaimed. "Did you ever see women so weary-looking and so dowdy? They do not talk. They seem to spend their time yawning and inspecting their neighbour's dresses through those hateful glasses. It never seems to enter their heads to try and amuse their menkind."

"I guess they want a few more American women here," Sydney remarked. "I can see what you mean. There's a sort of frozen way about so many of these English people."

Anna nodded.

"After all," she said, "I suppose it is because we do not understand what is correct. Vivacity is no doubt bad form. But why people come to such places if they do not mean to enjoy themselves I cannot imagine."

"To show their jewels and their husbands to their enemies," Brendon remarked.

"Poor husbands," Anna exclaimed compassionately. "Some day they will rebel. I believe that my sympathies will not be with my sex."

Two young men on their way down the room came suddenly to a standstill before Anna. The foremost, tall, clean-shaven, perfectly groomed, half extended his hand with a smile of recognition.

"Miss Pellissier, isn't it?" he said. "Glad to see you in London. No idea that you were here, though."

Anna looked up with a doubtful smile of non-recognition.

"My name is certainly Pellissier," she said, "but I am very sorry—I do not recognize you in the least."

The tall young man dropped his eyeglass and smiled.

"Had the pleasure of dining with you at the Ambassador's one night, before the show, you know—last September I think it was. Charley Pevenill was our host. My name is Armytage—Lord Ernest Armytage."

Anna had suddenly stiffened. She regarded the young man coldly. Her tone was icy.

"I am afraid that you are making a mistake," she said. "I was never at any such dinner, and I am quite sure that I do not know you."

"Perhaps you remember me, Miss Pellissier," the second young man interposed. "I had the pleasure of—er—meeting you more than once, I believe."

A spot of colour flared in Anna's cheek as she glanced towards the speaker. Something in his smile, in the cynical suggestiveness of his deferential tone, maddened her.

"To the best of my belief," she said, with quiet dignity, "I have never seen either of you before in my life."

For a fraction of a second the two young men hesitated. Then the foremost bowed and passed on.

"I am exceedingly sorry," he said. "Pray accept my apologies."

"And mine," murmured his companion, with the smile still lingering upon his lips.

They took their places at a distant table. Anna sat quite still for a moment, and then the colour suddenly returned to her cheeks. She laughed softly, and leaned across the table.

"Do not look so uncomfortable, both of you," she begged. "Those young men startled me at first, because they knew my name. I am quite sure though that they did not mean to be rude."

"Impudent beggars," Sydney growled. "I never wanted to kick any one so much in my life as that second fellow."

"I think," Anna said, "that it was only his manner. Do look at this tragedy in mauve, who has just come in. What can she be? The wife of a country tradesman, or a duchess? And such a meek little husband too. What can she have done to deserve such a fate? Oh!"

They both turned round at Anna's exclamation. A familiar figure was making his way towards them. Sydney sprang up.

"Why, it's David!" he exclaimed. "Hullo!"

Courtlaw, haggard, his deep-set eyes more brilliant than ever, took Anna's hand into his, and breathed a little close drawn sigh of content. He was introduced to Brendon, and a chair was brought by an attentive waiter. He declined supper, but took wine.

"Have you dropped from the skies?" Sydney asked wonderingly. "It was only yesterday I had your letter, and you never mentioned coming over."

"I had some unexpected business," Courtlaw answered shortly.

"And how did you find us here?"

"I called at Montague Street a few minutes after you had left. Mrs. White told me where to find you."

He leaned back in his chair as though wearied. Yet either the rest or the wine seemed already to have done him good. The lines about his mouth gradually softened. He talked very little and rather absently. In no way could he be said to contribute to the gaiety of the little party. But when they were on their way out he whispered in Anna's ear.

"Please let me drive you home. I want to talk to you, and I must return to-morrow."

Anna hesitated.

"We are Mr. Brendon's guests," she said, "and I scarcely think it would be nice of me to leave him alone with Sydney."

Courtlaw turned abruptly to Brendon.

"Mr. Brendon," he said, "may I rob you of your guest just for the drive home? I have only a few hours in England, and Miss Pellissier is an old friend."

"By all means," Brendon answered. "We will follow you in another cab."

They passed out on to the pavement, and the commissionaire called a hansom. The man looked closely at Anna as she crossed the footway, and as he held her skirt from the wheel he pressed something into her hand. Her fingers closed upon it

instinctively. It was a letter. She slipped it calmly into her pocket. The commissionaire smiled. It was a sovereign easily earned.

The hansom drove off. Suddenly Anna felt her hand seized and imprisoned in Courtlaw's burning fingers. She glanced into his face. It was enough.

"I have stood it for a month, Anna," he exclaimed. "You will not even answer my letters. I could not keep away any longer."

"Do you think that it was wise of you, or kind to come?" she asked quietly.

"Wise! Kind! What mockery words are! I came because I had to. I cannot live without you, Anna. Come back—you must come back. We can be married to-morrow in Paris. There! You are trying to take your hand away."

"You disappoint me," she said wearily. "You are talking like a boy. What is the use of it? I do not wish to marry you. I do not wish to return to Paris. You are doing your best to break our friendship."

"It is you," he cried, "you, who are talking folly, when you speak of friendship between you and me. It is not the woman who speaks there. It is the vapouring school girl. I tell you that I love you, Anna, and I believe that you love me. You are necessary to me. I shall give you my life, every moment and thought of my life. You must come back. See what you have made of me. I cannot work, I cannot teach. You have grown into my life, and I cannot tear you out."

Anna was silent. She was trembling a little. The man's passion was infectious. She had to school herself to speak the words which she knew would cut him like a knife.

"You are mistaken, David. I have counted you, and always hoped to count you, the best of my friends. But I do not love you. I do not love any one."

"I don't believe it," he answered hoarsely. "We have come too close together for me to believe it. You care for me a little, I know. I will teach you how to make that little sufficient."

"You came to tell me this?"

"I came for you," he declared fiercely.

The hansom sped through the crowded streets. Anna suddenly leaned forward and looked around her.

"We are not going the right way," she exclaimed.

"You are coming my way," Courtlaw answered. "Anna," he pleaded, "be merciful. You care for me just a little, I know. You are alone in the world, you have no one save yourself to consider. Come back with me to-night. Your old rooms are there, if you choose. I kept them on myself till the sight of your empty chair and the chill loneliness of it all nearly sent me mad."

Anna lifted her hand and pushed open the trap door.

"Drive to 13, Montague Street, cabman," she ordered.

The man pulled up his horse grumbling, and turned round. Courtlaw sat with folded arms. He said nothing.

"My friend," she said, "no! Let me tell you this. Nothing would induce me to marry you, or any man at present. I am a pauper, and as yet I have not discovered how to earn money. I am determined to fight my own little battle with the world—there must be a place for me somewhere,

and I mean to find it. Afterwards, it may be different. If I were to marry you now I should feel a dependent being all my life—a sort of parasitical creature without blood or muscle. I should lose every scrap of independence—even my self-respect. However good you were to me, and however happy I was in other ways, I should find this intolerable."

"All these things," he muttered bitterly, "this desperate resolve to take your life into your own hands, your unnatural craving for independence, would never trouble you for a moment—if you really cared."

"Then perhaps," she answered, with a new coldness in her tone, "perhaps I really do not care. No, don't interrupt me. I think that I am a little disappointed in you. You appear to be amongst those strong enough in all ordinary matters, but who seem to think it quite natural and proper to give in at once and play the weakling directly—one cares. Do you think that it makes for happiness to force oneself into the extravagant belief that love is the only thing in the world worth having, and to sacrifice for it independence, self-respect, one's whole scheme of life. I cannot do it, David. Perhaps, as you say, I do not really care—but I cannot do it."

He was strangely silent. He did not even reply to her for several minutes.

"I cannot reason with you," he said at last wearily. "I speak from my heart, and you answer from your brain."

"Believe me that I have answered you wisely," she said, in a gentler tone, "wisely for you too, as well as myself. And now you must go back, take up your work and think all this over. Presently

you will see that I am right, and then you shall take your vacation over here, and we will be good comrades again."

He smiled bitterly as he handed her from the cab. He declined to come in.

"Will you tell Sydney that I will see him in the morning," he said. "I am staying at the Savoy. He can come round there."

"You will shake hands with me, please," she begged.

He took her fingers and lifted his eyes to hers. Something he saw there made him feel for a moment ashamed. He pressed the long shapely hand warmly in his.

"Good-bye," he said earnestly. "Please forgive me. You are right. Quite right."

She was able to go straight to her room without delay, and she at once locked the door with a little sigh of relief. She found herself struggling with a storm of tears.

A sob was strangled in her throat. She struggled fiercely not to give way.

"Oh, I am lonely," she moaned. "I am lonely. If I could but——"

* * * * *

To escape from her thoughts she began to undress, humming a light tune to herself, though her eyes were hot with unshed tears, and the sobs kept rising in her throat. As she drew off her skirt she felt something in the pocket, and remembered the letter which the commissionaire at the Carlton had given her. She tore open the envelope and read it.

MY DEAR GIRL,—

"I am so sorry if we made asses of ourselves to-

morsel of roll which lay upon her plate, "my only chance of occupation has lain with a photographer who engaged me on the spot and insulted me in half-an-hour. What beasts men are! I cannot typewrite, my three stories are still wandering round, two milliners have refused me as a lay figure because business was so bad. I am no use for a clerk because I do not understand shorthand. After all, I fancy that I shall have to apply for a situation as a nursery governess who understands French. Faugh!"

She took up the last morsel of roll, and held it delicately between her long slim fingers. Then her white teeth gleamed, and her excuse for remaining any longer before that little marble table was gone. She rose, paid her bill, and turned westwards.

She walked with long swinging steps, scorning the thought of omnibuses or the tube. If ever she felt fatigue in these long tramps which had already taken her half over London, she never admitted it. Asking her way once or twice, she passed along Fleet Street into the Strand, and crossed Trafalgar Square into Piccadilly. Here she walked more slowly, looking constantly at the notices in the shop windows. One she entered and met with a sharp rebuff, which she appeared to receive unmoved. But when she reached the pavement outside her teeth were clenched, and she carried herself unconsciously an inch or so higher. It was just then that she came face to face with Nigel Ennison.

He was walking listlessly along, well-dressed, *debonnair*, good-looking. Directly he saw Anna he accosted her. His manner was deferential, even eager. Anna, who was disposed to be sharply critical, could find no fault with it.

"How fortunate I am, Miss Pellissier! All day I have been hoping that I might run across you. You got my note?"

"I certainly received a note," Anna admitted.

"You were going to answer it?"

"Certainly not!" she said deliberately.

He looked at her with an expression of comical despair.

"What have I done, Miss Pellissier?" he pleaded. "We were good friends in Paris, weren't we? You made me all sorts of promises, we planned no end of nice things, and then—without a word to any one you disappeared. Now we meet again, and you will scarcely look at me. You seem altogether altered, too. Upon my word—you are Miss Pellissier, aren't you?"

"I certainly am," she admitted.

He looked at her for a moment in a puzzled sort of way.

"Of course!" he said. "You have changed somehow—and you certainly are less amiable."

She laughed. After all, his was a pleasant face, and a pleasant voice, and very likely Annabel had behaved badly.

"Perhaps," she said, "it is the London climate. It depresses one, you know."

He nodded.

"You look more like your old self when you smile," he remarked. "But, forgive me, you are tired. Won't you come and have some tea with me? There is a new place in Bond Street," he hastened to say, "where everything is very well done, and they give us music, if that is any attraction to you."

She hesitated and looked for a moment straight

into his eyes. He certainly bore inspection. He was tall and straight, and his expression was good.

"I will come—with pleasure," she said, "if you will promise to treat me as a new acquaintance—not to refer to—Paris—at all."

"I promise," he answered heartily. "Allow me."

He took his place by her side, and they talked lightly of London, the shops and people. They found a cosy little table in the tea-rooms, and everything was delicious. Anna, with her marvellous capacity for enjoyment, ate cakes and laughed, and forgot that she had had tea an hour or so ago at an A.B.C., or that she had a care in the world.

"By-the-bye," he said, presently, "your sister was married to old Ferringhall the other day, wasn't she? I saw the notice in the papers."

Anna never flinched. But after the first shock came a warm glow of relief. After all, it was what she had been praying for—and Annabel could not have known her address.

"My sister and I," she said slowly, "have seen very little of each other lately. I fancy that Sir John does not approve of me."

Ennison shrugged his shoulders.

"Sort of man who can see no further than his nose," he remarked contemptuously. "Fearful old fogey! I can't imagine any sister of yours putting up with him for a moment. I thought perhaps you were staying with them, as you did not seem particularly anxious to recognize your old friends."

Anna shook her head.

"No, I am alone," she answered.

"Then we must try and make London endurable



"AT A BOARDING HOUSE?" HE GASPED."

[illegible] [Page 107

for you," he remarked cheerfully. "What night will you dine and go to the theatre with me?—and how about Hurlingham on Saturday?"

Anna shook her head.

"Thank you," she said coolly. "Those things are not for me just at present."

He was obviously puzzled. Anna sighed as she reflected that her sister had simply revelled in her indiscretions.

"Come," he said, "you can't be meaning to bury yourself. There must be something we can do. What do you say to Brighton——"

Anna looked at him quietly—and he never finished his sentence.

"May I ask whether you are staying with friends in town?" he inquired deferentially. "Perhaps your engagements are made for you."

"I am staying," she answered coolly, "at a small boarding-house near Russell Square."

He dropped his eyeglass with a clatter.

"At a boarding-house?" he gasped.

She nodded.

"Yes. I am an independent sort of person," she continued, "and I am engaged in an attempt to earn my own living. You don't happen to know of any one, I suppose, who wants a nursery governess, or a clerk—without shorthand—or a tryer-on, or a copyist, or——"

"For Heaven's sake stop, Miss Pellissier," he interrupted. "What a hideous repertoire! If you are in earnest about wanting to earn money, why on earth don't you accept an engagement here?"

"An engagement?" she queried.

"On the stage? Yes. You would not have the slightest difficulty."

She laughed softly to herself.

"Do you know," she confessed, "I never thought of that?"

He looked at her as though doubting even now whether she could possibly be in earnest.

"I cannot conceive," he said, "how any other occupation could ever have occurred to you. You do not need me to remind you of your success at Paris. The papers are continually wondering what has become of 'Alcide.' Your name alone would fill any music hall in London."

Again that curious smile which puzzled him so much parted her lips for a moment.

"Dear me," she said, "I fancy you exaggerate my fame. I can't imagine Londoners—particularly interested in me."

He shrugged his shoulders. Even now he was not at all sure that she was not playing with him. There were so many things about her which he could not understand. She began to draw on her gloves thoughtfully.

"I am very much obliged for the tea," she said. "This is a charming place, and I have enjoyed the rest."

"It was a delightful piece of good fortune that I should have met you," he answered. "I hope that whatever your plans may be, you will give me the opportunity of seeing something of you now and then."

"I am afraid," she said, preceding him down the narrow stairs, "that I am going to be too busy to have much time for gadding about. However, I daresay that we shall come across one another before long."

"That is provokingly indefinite," he answered, a

little ruefully. "Won't you give me your address?"

She shook her head.

"It is such a very respectable boarding-house," she said. "I feel quite sure that Mrs. White would not approve of callers."

"I have a clue, at any rate," he remarked, smiling. "I must try the Directory."

"I wish you good luck," she answered. "There are a good many Whites in London."

"May I put you in a hansom?" he asked, lifting his stick.

"For Heaven's sake, no," she answered quickly. "Do you want to ruin me? I shall walk back."

"I may come a little way, then?" he begged.

"If you think it worth while," she answered doubtfully.

Apparently he thought it very much worth while. Restraining with an effort his intense curiosity, he talked of general subjects only, trying his best to entertain her. He succeeded so well that they were almost in Montague Street before Anna stopped short.

"Heavens!" she exclaimed. "I have brought you very nearly to my door. Go back at once, please."

He held out his hand obediently.

"I'll go," he said, "but I warn you that I shall find you out."

For a moment she was grave.

"Well," she said, "I may be leaving where I am in a few days, so very likely you will be no better off."

He looked at her intently.

"Miss Pellissier," he said, "I don't understand

this change in you. Every word you utter puzzles me. I have an idea that you are in some sort of trouble. Won't you let me—can't I be of any assistance ? "

He was obviously in earnest. His tone was kind and sympathetic.

"You are very good," she said. "Indeed I shall not forget your offer. But just now there is nothing which you or anybody can do. Good-bye."

He was dismissed, and he understood it. Anna crossed the street, and letting herself in at No. 13 with a latchkey went humming lightly up to her room. She was in excellent spirits, and it was not until she had taken off her hat, and was considering the question of dinner or no dinner, that she remembered that another day had passed, and she was not a whit nearer being able to pay her to-morrow's bill.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PUZZLEMENT OF NIGEL ENNISON

NIGEL ENNISON walked towards his club the most puzzled man in London. There could not, he decided, possibly be two girls so much alike. Besides, she had admitted her identity. And yet, —he thought of the supper party where he had met Annabel Pellissier, the stories about her, his own few minutes' whispered love-making! He was a self-contained young man, but his cheeks grew hot at the thought of the things which it had seemed quite natural to say to her then, but which he knew very well would have been instantly resented by the girl whom he had just left. He went over her features one by one in his mind. They were the same. He could not doubt it. There was the same airy grace of movement, the same deep brown hair and alabaster skin. He found himself thinking up all the psychology which he had ever read. Was this the result of some strange experiment? It was the person of Annabel Pellissier—the soul of a very different order of being.

He spent the remainder of the afternoon looking for a friend whom he found at last in the billiard room of one of the smaller clubs to which he belonged. After the usual laconic greetings, he drew him on one side.

"Fred," he said, "do you remember taking me to dinner at the Ambassador's, one evening last September, to meeet a girl who was singing there? Hamilton and Drummond and his lot were with us."

"Of course," his friend answered. "*La belle* Alcide, wasn't it? Annabel Pellissier was her real name. Jolly nice girl, too."

Ennison nodded.

"I thought I saw her in town to-day," he said. "Do you happen to know whether she is supposed to be here?"

"Very likely indeed," Captain Fred Meddoes answered, lighting a cigarette. "I heard that she had chucked her show at the French places and gone in for a reform all round. Sister's got married to that bounder Ferringhall."

Ennison took an easy chair.

"What a little brick!" he murmured. "She must have character. It's no half reform either. What do you know about her, Fred? I am interested."

Meddoes turned round from the table on which he was practising shots and shrugged his shoulders.

"Not much," he answered, "and yet about all there is to be known, I fancy. There were two sisters, you know. Old Jersey and Hampshire family, the Pellissiers, and a capital stock, too, I believe."

"Any one could see that the girls were ladies," Ennison murmured.

"No doubt about that," Meddoes continued. "The father was in the army, and got a half-pay job at St. Heliers. Died short, I suppose, and the girls had to shift for themselves. One went in for

painting, kept straight and married old Ferringhall a week or so ago—the Lord help her. The other kicked over the traces a bit, made rather a hit with her singing at some of those French places, and went the pace in a mild, lady-like sort of way. Cheveney was looking after her, I think, then. If she's over, he probably knows all about it."

Ennison looked steadily at the cigarette which he was tapping on his forefinger.

"So Cheveney was her friend, you think, eh?" he remarked.

"No doubt about that, I fancy," Meddoes answered lightly. "He ran some Austrian fellow off. She was quite the rage, in a small way, you know. Strange, demure-looking young woman, with wonderful complexion and eyes, and a style about her, too. Care for a hundred up?"

Ennison shook his head.

"Can't stop, thanks," he answered. "See you to-night, I suppose?"

He sauntered off.

"I'm damned if I'll believe it," he muttered to himself savagely.

But for the next few days he avoided Cheveney like the plague.

* * * * *

The same night he met Meddoes and Drummond together, the latter over from Paris on a week's leave from the Embassy.

"Odd thing," Meddoes remarked, "we were just talking about the Pellissier girl. Drummond was telling me about the way old Ferringhall rounded upon them all at the club."

"Sounds interesting," Ennison remarked. "May I hear?"

"It really isn't much to tell," Drummond answered. "You know what a fearful old prig Ferringhall is, always goes about as though the whole world were watching him? We tried to show him around Paris, but he wouldn't have any of it. Talked about his years, his position and his constituents, and always sneaked off back to his hotel just when the fun was going to begin. Well one night, some of us saw him, or thought we saw him, at a café dining with 'Alcide,'—as a matter of fact, it seems that it was her sister. He came into the club the next day, and of course we went for him thick. Jove, he didn't take to it kindly, I can tell you. Stood on his dignity and shut us up in great style. It seems that he was a sort of family friend of the Pellissiers, and it was the artist sister whom he was with. The joke of it is that he's married to her now, and cuts me dead."

"I suppose," Ennison said, "the likeness between the sisters must be rather exceptional?"

"I never saw the goody-goody one close to, so I can't say," Drummond answered. "Certainly I was a little way off at the café, and she had a hat and veil on, but I could have sworn that it was 'Alcide.'"

"Is 'Alcide' still in Paris?" Ennison asked.

"Don't think so," Drummond answered. "I heard the other day that she'd been taken in by some cad of a fellow who was cutting a great dash in Paris, personating Meysey Hill, the great railway man. Anyhow, she's disappeared for some reason or other. Perhaps Ferringhall has pensioned her off. He's the sort of johnny who wouldn't care about having a sister-in-law on the loose."

"Ennison here thought he saw her in London," Meddoes remarked.

Drummond nodded.

"Very likely. The two sisters were very fond of one another, I believe. Perhaps Sir John is going to take the other one under his wing. Who's for a rubber of whist?"

Ennison made so many mistakes that he was glad to cut out early in the evening. He walked across the Park and called upon his sister.

"Is Lady Lascelles in?" he asked the butler.

"Her ladyship dined at home," the man answered. "I have just ordered a carriage for her. I believe that her ladyship is going to Carey House, and on to the Marquis of Waterford's ball," he added, hastily consulting a diary on the hall table.

A tall elegantly dressed woman, followed by a maid, came down the broad staircase.

"Is that you, Nigel?" she asked. "I hope you are going to Carey House."

He shook his head, and threw open the door of a great dimly-lit apartment on the ground floor.

"Come in here a moment, will you, Blanche," he said. "I want to speak to you."

She assented, smiling. He was her only brother, and she his favourite sister. He closed the door.

"I want to ask you a question," he said. "A serious question."

She stopped buttoning her glove, and looked at him.

"Well?"

"You and all the rest of them are always lamenting that I do not marry. Supposing I made up my mind to marry some one of good enough family, but who was in a somewhat doubtful position,

concerning whose antecedents, in fact, there was a certain amount of scandal. Would you stand by me—and her ? "

" My dear Nigel ! " she exclaimed. " Are you serious ? "

" You know very well that I should never joke on such a subject. Mind, I am anticipating events. Nothing is settled upon. It may be, it probably will all come to, nothing. But I want to know whether in such an event you would stand by me ? "

She held out her hand.

" You can count upon me, Nigel," she said. " But for you Dad would never have let me marry Lascelles. He was only a younger son, and you know what trouble we had. I am with you through thick and thin, Nigel."

He kissed her, and handed her into the carriage. Then he went back to his rooms and lit a cigar.

" There are two things to be done," he said softly to himself. " The first is to discover what she is here for, and where she is staying. The second is to somehow meet Lady Ferringhall. These fellows must be right," he added thoughtfully, " and yet—there's a mystery somewhere."

CHAPTER XIV

THE POSTER OF "ALCIDE"

ON Saturday mornings there was deposited on the plate of each guest at breakfast time, a long folded paper with Mrs. White's compliments. Anna thrust hers into her pocket unopened, and for the first time left the house without a smile upon her face. She was practically destitute of jewellery. The few pence left in her purse would only provide a very scanty lunch. Another day of non-success would mean many disagreeable things.

And even she was forced to admit to herself that this last resource of hers was a slender reed on which to lean. She mounted the stairs of the theatrical agent's office with very much less than her usual buoyancy, nor did she find much encouragement in the general appearance of the room into which she was shown. There were already a score or more of people there, some standing up and talking together, others seated in chairs ranged along the wall. Beyond was another door, on which was painted in black letters:

MR. EARLES,
Strictly Private.

Every one stared at Anna. Anna stared back at every one with undaunted composure. A Hebraic-looking young man with shiny frock coat

and very high collar, advanced towards her languidly.

"Want to see Mr. Earles?" he inquired.

"I do," Anna answered. "Here is my card. Will you take it in to him?"

The young man smiled in a superior manner.

"Have to take your turn," he remarked laconically. "There's twenty before you, and Mr. Earles is going out at twelve sharp—important engagement. Better come another morning."

"Thank you," Anna answered. "I will take my chance."

She removed some posters from a chair, and seated herself coolly. The young man looked at her.

"Not doing anything in stock companies just now," he remarked.

"Indeed," Anna answered. "Very sensible of him, I'm sure."

There was a little titter. The young man turned on his heel.

"Unless you have an appointment—which you haven't," he said, "you'll only waste your time here."

"I can spare it," Anna answered suavely.

The young man gave it up, and entered into a lively little war of words with a yellow-haired young person near the door. Anna picked up an ancient copy of the *Era*, and began to turn over the pages in a leisurely way. The conversation which her entrance had interrupted began to buzz again all around her. A quarter of an hour passed. Then the inner door opened abruptly. A tall, clean-shaven man came out and walked rapidly through the room, exchanging greetings right and left, but evidently anxious to avoid

being detained. Mr. Earles himself stood upon the threshold of his sanctum, the prototype of the smart natty Jew, with black hair, waxed moustache, and a wired flower in his button-hole. A florid-looking young woman rose up and accosted him eagerly.

"I'm next, Mr. Earles," she exclaimed. "Been sitting on the doorstep almost for two hours."

"In a minute, in a minute," he answered, his eyes fixed upon Anna. "Reuben, come here."

The young man obeyed the summons. His employer retreated into the further apartment, leaving the door ajar.

"What's that young lady's name—girl in dark brown, stranger here?" Mr. Earles asked sharply.

The youth produced a crumpled-up card from his waistcoat pocket. A sense of impending disaster was upon him. Mr. Earles glanced at it, and his eyes flashed with anger.

"You blithering idiot!" he exclaimed.

Mr. Earles strode into the waiting-room. His face was wreathed in smiles, his be-ringed hand was cordially outstretched.

"My dear Miss Pellissier," he said impressively, "this is an unexpected pleasure. Come in! Come in, do. I must apologize for my young puppy of a clerk. If I had known that you were here you should not have been kept waiting for a second."

It took a good deal to surprise Anna, but it was all she could do to follow Mr. Earles with composure into the inner room. There was a little murmur of consternation from the waiting crowd, and the florid young woman showed signs of temper, to which Mr. Earles was absolutely indifferent. He

installed Anna in a comfortable easy chair, and placed his own between her and the door.

"Come," he said, "this is capital, capital. It was only a few months ago that I told you you must come to London, and you only laughed at me. Yet here you are, and at precisely the right moment, too. By-the-bye," he added, in a suddenly altered tone, "I hope, I trust—that you have not entered into any arrangements with any one here?"

"I—oh no!" Anna said, a little faintly. "I have made no arrangements as yet—none at all."

Mr. Earles recovered his spirits.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "Your arrival is really most opportune. The halls are on the look-out for something new. By-the bye, do you recognize that?"

Anna looked and gasped. An enormous poster almost covered one side of the wall—*the* poster. The figure of the girl upon it in plain black dress, standing with her hands behind her, was an undeniable and astonishing likeness of herself. It was her figure, her style of dress, her manner of arranging the hair. Mr. Earles regarded it approvingly.

"A wonderful piece of work," he declared. "A most wonderful likeness, too, I hope in a few days, Miss Pellissier, that these posters will be livening up our London hoardings."

Anna leaned back in the chair and laughed softly. Even this man had accepted her for 'Alcide' without a moment's question. Then all the embarrassments of the matter flashed in upon her. She was suddenly grave.

"I suppose, Mr. Earles," she said, "that if I were to tell you that although that poster was

designed from a rough study of me, and although my name is Pellissier, that nevertheless, I am not 'Alcide,' would you believe me?"

"You can try it on, if you like," Mr. Earles remarked genially. "My only answer would be to ask you to look at that mirror and then at the poster. The poster is of 'Alcide.' It's a duplicate of the French one."

Anna got up and looked at the mirror and then at the poster. The likeness was ridiculous.

"Well?" she said, sitting down again. "I want an engagement."

"Capital!" Mr. Earles declared. "Any choice as to which of the Halls? You can pick and choose, you know. I recommend the 'Unusual.'"

"I have no choice," Anna declared.

"I can get you," Mr. Earles said, slowly, keeping his eyes fixed upon her, "forty at the 'Unusual,' two turns, encores voluntary, six for matinées. We should not bar any engagements at private houses, but in other respects the arrangement must be exclusive."

"Forty what?" Anna asked bewildered.

"Guineas, of course," Mr. Earles answered, glibly. "Forty guineas a week. I mentioned sixty, I believe, when I was in Paris, but there are expenses, and just now business is bad."

Anna was speechless, but she had presence of mind enough to sit still until she had recovered herself. Mr. Earles watched her anxiously. She appeared to be considering.

"Of course," he ventured, "I could try for more at the Alhambra. Very likely they would give——"

"I should be satisfied with the sum you mention," Anna said quietly, "but there are difficulties."

"Don't use such a word, my dear young lady," Mr. Earles said persuasively. "Difficulties indeed. We'll make short work of them."

"I hope that you may," Anna answered enigmatically. "In the first place, I have no objection to the posters, as they have no name on them, but I do not wish to appear at all upon the stage as 'Alcide.' If you engage me it must be upon my own merits. You are taking it for granted that I am 'Alcide.' As a matter of fact, I am not."

"Excuse me," Mr. Earles said, "but this is rubbish."

"Call it what you like," Anna answered. "I can sing the songs 'Alcide' sang, and in the same style. But I will not be engaged as 'Alcide' or advertised under that name."

Mr. Earles scratched his chin for a moment thoughtfully. Then a light seemed to break in upon him. He slapped his knee.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "Of course, I remember now. It was your sister who married Sir John Ferringhall the other day, wasn't it?"

Anna nodded.

"It was," she admitted.

"You needn't say a word more," Mr. Earles declared. "I see the difficulty. The old fool's been working on you through your sister to keep off the stage. He's a prig to the finger-tips, is Sir John—doesn't know what an artist is. It's awkward, but we'll get round it somehow. Now I'll tell you what I propose. Let me run you for six months. I'll give you, say, thirty-five guineas a week clear of expenses, and half of anything you earn above the two turns a night. What do you say?"

"I agree," Anna said coldly, "if you will make it three months."

"Better say six," Mr. Earles protested, seating himself before the desk, and dipping his pen in the ink.

"Four," Anna decided firmly. "I shall not agree to six."

"It scarcely gives me a chance," Mr. Earles said, with a resigned sigh, "but I shall rely upon you to stick to me so long as I do the right thing by you. You can't do without an agent, and there's no one can run you better than I can."

"You must also put in the agreement," Anna said, "that I do not represent myself to be 'Alcide,' and that I am not advertised to the public by that name."

Mr. Earles threw down his pen with a little exclamation.

"Come this way," he said.

He opened the door of still another room, in one corner of which was a grand piano. He seated himself before it.

"Go to the far corner," he said, "and sing the last verse of *Les Petites*."

He struck a note, and Anna responded. Playing with one hand he turned on his stool to glance at her. Instinctively she had fallen into the posture of the poster, her hands behind her, her head bent slightly forward, her chin uplifted, her eyes bright with the drollery of the song. Mr. Earles closed the piano with a little bang.

"You are a funny, a very funny young lady," he said, "but we waste time here. You do not need my compliments. We will get on with the agreement and you shall have in it whatever rubbish you like."

Anna laughed, and went back to her easy chair. She knew that her voice was superior to Annabel's, and she had no further qualms. Whilst she was wondering how to frame her request for an advance, Mr. Earles drew out his cheque book.

"You will not object," he said, glancing towards her, "to accepting a deposit. It is customary even where an agreement is drawn."

"I shall have no objection at all," Anna assured him.

He handed her a cheque for thirty-one pounds, ten shillings, and read the agreement through to her. Anna took up the pen, and signed, after a moment's hesitation,

A. Pellissier.

"I will send you a copy," Mr. Earles said, rubbing his hands together, "by post. Now, will you do me the honour of lunching with me, Miss Pellissier?"

Anna hesitated.

"Perhaps," he queried, "you wish to avoid being seen about with any one—er—connected with the profession, under present circumstances. If so, do not hesitate to tell me. Be frank, I beg you, Miss Pellissier. I am already too much flattered that you should have given me your confidence."

"You are very good, Mr. Earles," Anna said. "I think, perhaps if you will excuse me, that we will defer the luncheon."

"Just as you wish," Mr. Earles declared good-humouredly, "but I shall not let you go without drinking a glass of wine to our success.

He plunged into one of his drawers, and brought up a small gold-foiled bottle. The cork came out with a loud pop, and Anna could not help wondering how it must sound to the patient little crowd



"SHE DRANK HER GLASS OF WINE, HOWEVER, AND CLANKED GLASSES GOOD NATUREDLY."

outside. She drank her glass of wine, however, and clanked glasses good-naturedly with Mr. Earles.

"You must leave me your address if you please," he said, as she rose to go.

She wrote it down. He looked at it with uplifted eyebrows, but made no remark.

"I shall probably want you to come down to the 'Unusual' to-morrow morning," he said. "Bring any new songs you may have."

Anna nodded, and Mr. Earles attended her obsequiously to the door. She descended the stairs, and found herself at last in the street—alone. It was a brief solitude, however. A young man, who had been spending the last hour walking up and down on the opposite side of the way, came quickly over to her. She looked up, and recognized Mr. Brendon.

CHAPTER XV

" HE WILL NOT FORGET ! "

THE external changes in Brendon following on his alteration of fortune were sufficiently noticeable. From head to foot he was attired in the fashionable garb of the young man of the moment. Not only that, but he carried himself erect—the slight slouch which had bent his shoulders had altogether disappeared. He came to her at once, and turning, walked by her side.

" Now I should like to know," she said, looking at him with a quiet smile, " what you are doing here ? It is not a particularly inspiring neighbourhood for walking about by yourself."

" I plead guilty, Miss Pellissier," he answered at once. " I saw you go into that place, and I have been waiting for you ever since."

" I am not sure whether I feel inclined to scold or thank you," she declared. " I think as I feel in a good humour it must be the latter."

He faced her doggedly.

" Miss Pellissier," he said, " I am going to take a liberty."

" You alarm me," she murmured, smiling.

" Don't think that I have been playing the spy upon you," he continued. " Neither Sydney nor I would think of such a thing. But we can't help

noticing. You have been going out every morning, and coming home late—tired out—too tired to come down to dinner. Forgive me, but you have been looking, have you not, for some employment?"

"Quite true!" she answered. "I have found out at last what a useless person I am—from a utilitarian point of view. It has been very humiliating."

"And that, I suppose," he said, waving his stick towards Mr. Earles' office, "was your last resource."

"It certainly was," she admitted. "I changed my last shilling yesterday."

He was silent for a moment or two. His lips were tight drawn. His eyes flashed as he turned towards her.

"Do you think that it is kind of you, Miss Pellissier," he said, almost roughly, "to ignore your friends so? In your heart you know quite well that you could pay Sydney or me no greater compliment than to give us just a little of your confidence. We know London, and you are a stranger here. Surely our advice would have been worth having, at any rate. You might have spared yourself many useless journeys and disappointments, and us a good deal of anxiety. Instead, you are willing to go to a place like that where you ought not to be allowed to think of showing yourself."

"Why not?" she asked quietly.

"The very question shows your ignorance," he declared. "You know nothing about the stage. You haven't an idea what the sort of employment you could get there would be like, the sort of people you would be mixed up with. It is positively hateful to think of it."

She laid her fingers for a moment upon his arm.

"Mr. Brendon," she said, "if I could ask for advice, or borrow money from any one, I would from you—there! But I cannot. I never could. I suppose I ought to have been a man. You see, I have had to look after myself so long that I have developed a terrible bump of independence."

"Such independence," he answered quickly, "is a vice. You see to what it has brought you. You are going to accept a post as chorus girl, or super, or something of that sort."

"You do not flatter me," she laughed.

"I am too much in earnest," he answered, "to be able to take this matter lightly."

"I am rebuked," she declared. "I suppose my levity is incorrigible. But seriously, things are not so bad as you think."

He groaned.

"They never seem so at first!" he said.

"You do not quite understand," she said gently. "I will tell you the truth. It is true that I have accepted an engagement from Mr. Earles, but it is a good one. I am not going to be a chorus girl, or even a super. I have never told you so, or Sydney, but I can sing—rather well. When my father died, and we were left alone in Jersey, I was quite a long time deciding whether I would go in for singing professionally or try painting. I made a wrong choice, it seems—but my voice remains."

"You are really going on the stage, then?" he said slowly.

"In a sense—yes."

Brendon went very pale.

"Miss Pellissier," he said, "don't!"

"Why not?" she asked, smiling. "I must live, you know."

"I haven't told any one the amount," he went on. "It sounds too ridiculous. But I have two hundred thousand pounds. Will you marry me?"

Anna looked at him in blank amazement. Then she burst into a peal of laughter.

"My dear boy," she exclaimed. "How ridiculous! Fancy you with all that money! For heaven's sake, though, do not go about playing the Don Quixote like this. It doesn't matter with me, but there are at least a dozen young women in Mr. Earles' waiting-room who would march you straight off to a registrar's office."

"You have not answered my question," he reminded her.

"Nor am I going to," she answered, smiling. "I am going to ignore it. It was really very nice of you, but to-morrow you will laugh at it as I do now."

"Is it necessary," he said, "for me to tell you

"Stop, please," she said firmly.

Brendon was silent.

"Do not force me to take you seriously," she continued. "I like to think of your offer. It was impulsive and natural. Now let us forget it."

"I understand," he said, doggedly.

"And you must please not look at me as though I were an executioner," she declared lightly. "I will tell you something if you like. One of the reasons why I left Paris and came to London was because there was a man there who wanted me to marry him. I really cared for him a little, but I am absolutely determined not to marry for some time

at any rate. I do not want to get only a second-hand flavour of life. One can learn and understand only by personal experience, by actual contact with the realities of life. I did not want anything made smooth and easy for me. That is why I would not marry this man whom I did and whom I do care for a little. Later on—well then the time may come. Then perhaps I shall send for him if he has not forgotten."

"I do not know who he is," Brendon said quietly, "but he will not forget."

Anna shrugged her shoulders lightly.

"Who can tell?" she said. "Your sex is a terrible fraud. It is generally deficient in the qualities it prides itself upon most. Men do not understand constancy as women do."

Brendon was not inclined to be led away from the point.

"We will take it then," he said, "that you have refused or ignored one request I have made you this morning. I have yet another. Let me lend you some money. Between comrades it is the most usual thing in the world, and I do not see how your sex intervenes. Let me keep you from that man's clutches. Then we can look out together for such employment—as would be more suitable for you. I know London better than you, and I have had to earn my own living. You cannot refuse me this."

He looked at her anxiously, and she met his glance with a dazzling smile of gratitude.

"Indeed," she said, "I would not. But it is no longer necessary. I cannot tell you much about it, but my bad times are over for the present. I will tell you what you shall give me, if you like."

"Well?"

"Lunch! I am hungry—tragically hungry."

He called for a hansom.

"After all," he said, "I am not sure that you are not a very material person."

"I am convinced of it," she answered. "Let us go to that little place at the back of the Palace. I'm not half smart enough for the West End."

"Wherever you like!" he answered, a little absently.

They alighted at the restaurant, and stood for a moment in the passage looking into the crowded room. Suddenly a half stifled exclamation broke from Anna's lips. Brendon felt his arm seized. In a moment they were in the street outside. Anna jumped into a waiting hansom.

"Tell him to drive — anywhere," she exclaimed.

Brendon told him the name of a distant restaurant and sprang in by her side. She was looking anxiously at the entrance to the restaurant. The commissionaire stood there, tall and imperturbable. There was no one else in the doorway. She leaned back in the corner of the cab with a little sigh of relief. A smile flickered upon her lips as she glanced towards Brendon, who was very serious indeed. Her sense of humour could not wholly resist his abnormal gravity.

"I am so sorry to have startled you," she said, "but I was startled myself. I saw some one in there whom I have always hoped that I should never meet again. I hope—I am sure that he did not see me."

"He certainly did not follow you out," Brendon answered.

"His back was towards me," Anna said. "I saw his face in a mirror. I wonder——"

"London is a huge place," Brendon said. "Even if he lives here you may go all your life and never come face to face with him again."

CHAPTER XVI

"THIS IS MY WIFE"

ANNA, notwithstanding her momentary fright in the middle of the day, was in high spirits. She felt that for a time at any rate her depressing struggle against continual failure was at an end. She had paid her bill, and she had enough left in her purse to pay many such. Beyond that everything was nebulous. She knew that in her new rôle she was as likely as not to be a rank failure. But the relief from the strain of her immediate necessities was immense. She had been in the drawing-room for a few minutes before the gong had sounded, and had chattered gaily to every one. Now, in her old place, she was doing her best thoroughly to enjoy a most indifferent dinner.

"Your brother has gone?" she asked Sydney, between the courses.

He nodded.

"Yes. David left this afternoon. I do not think that he has quite got over his surprise at finding you established here."

She laughed.

"After all, why should he be surprised?" she remarked. "Of course, one lives differently in Paris, but then—Paris is Paris. I think that a boarding house is the very best place for a woman

who wants to develop her sense of humour. Only I wish that it did not remind one so much of a second-hand clothes shop."

Sydney looked at her doubtfully.

"Now I suppose Brendon understands exactly what you mean," he remarked. "He looks as though he did, at any rate. I don't! Please enlighten me."

She laughed gaily—and she had a way when she laughed of throwing back her head and showing her beautiful white teeth, so that mirth from her was a thing very much to be desired.

"Look round the table," she said. "Aren't we all just odds and ends of humanity—the left-overs, you know. There is something inconglomerate about us. We are amiable to one another, but we don't mix. We can't."

"You and I and Brendon get on all right, don't we?" Sydney objected.

"We may be exceptions," Anna answered. "We can't disprove the theory. Besides, I am thinking more of our relations with the rest of the world than with one another. There's old Mr. Carter, for instance. He has grandchildren and nephews, but they won't have anything to do with him. They know that he has an evil temper, a wretched digestion and nothing beyond his pension. He's a left-over, and so he's drifted here. Then there's Mrs. Shaw. She has two married daughters, but their husbands are doing well and getting their noses into, at any rate, what they imagine to be society. Mrs. Shaw eats peas with her knife. Ergo, Mrs. Shaw remains here. She too is a left-over. Miss Ellicot and her mother have plenty of relatives. They won't have the girl to live with them because

she wants to marry every man she meets, and isn't clever enough to hide it. Miss Ellicot too is a left-over."

"How about Brendon and me?" Sydney asked.

"You two? Oh, you don't count. You are only boys!" Anna laughed.

"I am twenty-six years old," Brendon said, "and I object to being considered anything of the sort. I do not mind being called a left-over, but I object to not counting."

"Well then, you shall count for what you like," Anna answered good-humouredly, "but you are neither of you in the least like the ordinary boarding-house young man. You don't wear a dinner coat with a flower in your buttonhole, or last night's shirt, or very glossy boots, nor do you haunt the drawing-room in the evening, or play at being musical. Besides——"

She stopped short. She herself, and one other there, recognized the interposition of something akin to tragedy. A thickly-set, sandy young man, with an unwholesome complexion and grease-smooth hair, had entered the room. He wore a black tail coat buttoned tightly over his chest, and a large diamond pin sparkled in a white satin tie which had seen better days. He bowed awkwardly to Mrs. White, who held out her hand and beamed a welcome upon him.

"Now isn't this nice!" that lady exclaimed. "I'm sure we're all delighted to see you again, Mr. Hill. I do like to see old friends back here. If there's any one here whom you have not met I will make you acquainted with them after dinner. Will you take your old place by Miss Ellicot."

Miss Ellicot swept aside her skirts from the vacant

chair and welcomed the new-comer with one of her most engaging smiles.

"We were afraid that you had deserted us for good, Mr. Hill," she said graciously. "I suppose Paris is very, very distracting. You must come and tell me all about it, although I am not sure whether we shall forgive you for not having written to any of us."

Mr. Hill was exchanging greetings with his hostess, and salutations around the table.

"Thank you, m'am. Glad to get back, I'm sure," he said briskly. "Looks like old times here, I see. Sorry I'm a bit late the first evening. Got detained in the City, and——"

Then he met the fixed, breathless gaze of those wonderful eyes from the other side of the table, and he, too, broke off in the middle of his sentence. He breathed heavily, as though he had been running. His large, coarse lips drew wider apart. Slowly a mirthless and very unpleasant smile dawned upon his face.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed huskily. "Why,—it's—it's you!"

Amazement seemed to dry up the torrents of his speech. The girl regarded him with the face of a Sphinx. Only in her eyes there seemed to be some apprehension of the fact that the young man's clothes and manners were alike undesirable things.

"Are you speaking to me?" she asked calmly. "I am afraid that you are making a mistake. I am quite sure that I do not know you."

A dull flush burned upon his cheeks. He took his seat at the table, but leaned forward to address her. A note of belligerency had crept into his tone.

"Don't know me, eh? I like that. You are—or rather you were—" he corrected himself with an unpleasant little laugh, "Miss Pellissier, eh?"

A little sensation followed upon his words. Miss Ellicot pursed her lips and sat a little more upright. The lady whose husband had been Mayor of Hartlepool looked at Anna and sniffed. Mrs. White became conscious of a distinct sense of uneasiness, and showed it in her face. She was obliged, as she explained continually to every one who cared to listen, to be so very particular. On the other hand the two young men who sat on either side of Anna were already throwing murderous glances at the newcomer.

"My name," Anna replied calmly, "is certainly Pellissier, but I repeat that I do not know you. I never have known you."

He unfolded his serviette with fingers which shook all the time. His eyes never left her face. An ugly flush stained his cheeks.

"I've plenty of pals," he said, "who, when they've been doing Paris on the Q.T., like to forget all about it—even their names. But you——"

Something seemed to catch his breath. He never finished his sentence. There was a moment's breathless and disappointed silence. If only he had known it, sympathy was almost entirely with him.. Anna was no favourite at No. 13, Montague Street.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You appear," she said, without any sign of anger in her tone, and with unruffled composure, "to be a very impertinent person. Do you mind talking to some one else."

Mrs. White leaned forward in her chair with an anxious smile designed to throw oil upon the troubled waters.

"Come," she said. "We mustn't have any unpleasantness, and Mr. Hill's first night back amongst us, too. No doubt there's some little mistake. We all get deceived sometimes. Mr. Hill, I hope you won't find everything cold. You're a little late, you must remember, and we are punctual people here."

"I shall do very well, thank you, m'am," he answered shortly.

Sydney and Brendon vied with one another in their efforts to engage Anna in conversation, and Miss Ellicot, during the momentary lull, deemed it a favourable opportunity to recommence siege operations. The young man was mollified by her sympathy, and flattered by the obvious attempts of several of the other guests to draw him into conversation. Yet every now and then, during the progress of the meal, his attention apparently wandered, and leaning forward he glanced covertly at Anna with a curious mixture of expressions on his face.

"Very nice claret that you've chosen, sir," his left hand neighbour remarked. "Sound, good wine. Always drink it myself, but I'm on whisky for a week. Doctor's orders. Liver! Always obey my doctor. Sort of superstition after all, but I do it."

The young man fingered his wineglass, and gazed at its contents patronizingly.

"H'm!" he remarked. "I've drunk better."

"No doubt, no doubt. You've been a great traveller, I dare say. Know what's what, eh? You

young men do pick it up nowadays. My name's Carter, Mr. Hill. Dare say you don't remember me. Glad to welcome you back, sir."

"Very much obliged," Mr. Hill answered. "It's doubtful whether I shall stop long."

"Oh, I hope so," Mr. Carter replied. "Between you and me"—he leaned over and whispered in the young man's ear—"don't let that young woman's sauce bother you. I don't mind letting you into a bit of a secret. She's a most unpopular person here."

The young man nodded, and looked for the first time at his neighbour. Mr. Carter was a little undersized. His cheeks were thin, and his colour was unwholesome. He had a curious habit of holding his head on one side when he talked, and he blinked continually. He was nearer sixty than fifty. He affected to be a student of life. His pet weaknesses were to pose as a cynic and to be regarded as an eligible bachelor. He lived on an annuity of one hundred and fifty pounds, but was constantly studying the *Financial Times*. A drop in Consols depressed him for the whole evening. He was always *au fait* with the latest Stock Exchange rumours. Anna did not like him, and he did not like Anna.

"Unpopular, eh?" the young man repeated with an evil chuckle. "Well, I rather think I could——"

He stopped short. Mr. Carter, after waiting for several breathless moments to give him an opportunity of finishing his sentence, dashed gallantly into the breach.

"You could soon settle her hash, eh? No doubt about that. I've had my suspicions all the time.

Between you and me, Mr. Hill, I'm surprised at Mrs. White taking her in—very surprised indeed. This is really a very select place, you know—all quite superior people. Mr. Bullding there was a county councillor for many years, and Mrs. Bodham's husband—the old lady in ringlets there—was Mayor of Hartlepool."

"She brought references, I suppose?" the young man remarked.

Miss Ellicot, who had been an eager and interested listener, intervened with a toss of the head.

"References! Oh well, they're easy enough to get hold of, aren't they, Mr. Hill? Not that I want to be uncharitable. I'm willing enough to be friends with any one, but I really am forced to draw the line at a young woman of her—peculiar habits."

Mr. Hill emitted a sound which was something between a chuckle and a snort. A reminiscent light gleamed in his eyes.

"Bit frisky, eh?" he muttered.

Miss Ellicot looked hard into her plate. It was all very well for men to joke about such things, but her position was a difficult one. She was obliged to be very careful.

"I should not go so far as to make any statement of that sort," she said. "Perhaps, too, Miss Pellissier claims some extra licence because she is, or calls herself, an artist."

"Gone back to that, has she?" he remarked, under his breath. "Has she set up a studio here, then?"

"If she has," Miss Ellicot said, "no one has ever seen or heard of it. It's my belief that the term 'artist' covers a very great deal of ground. She's out all day, but what she does with herself no one

knows. Then you remember Mr. Courtlaw and Mr. Brendon, who are sitting on either side of her. The way she behaves with them is really—indecorous. They whisper and laugh together all through meals, and scarcely speak to any one else, which at a boarding house table, where we are all supposed to be friends and one family so to speak, is not my idea of good manners. And then afterwards—you will scarcely believe this, but it is absolutely true. Coffee, as I daresay you remember, is always served in the drawing-room immediately after dinner, and as a rule, whatever our engagements for the evening may be, we all have a sociable few minutes there. Mrs. White is very considerate, and she allows the gentlemen their cigarettes. Miss Pellissier came in once—the second night she was here. She made a wry face at the coffee, which was perhaps not quite so strong as usual, and since then, Mr. Hill, every evening she takes those two young gentlemen up into her own room and makes coffee there in some sort of a ridiculous machine. I don't know what you think of that, but I call it a most improper proceeding."

"No doubt about it," Mr. Carter declared cheerfully. "Most improper. I wonder Mrs. White permits it. She ought to be spoken to."

"I don't think," Miss Ellicot continued, "that young ladies who are living alone like Miss Pellissier, and I might say myself, for mother is so often away, can be too particular. Personally I should be very sorry indeed to do anything which could give rise to so much comment."

"Quite right, quite right, Miss Ellicot. I am sure you would," Mr. Carter declared.

But it was not Mr. Carter's approval for which

Miss Ellicot was anxious. She glanced tentatively at her neighbour. He seemed to be paying very little attention either to his dinner or to her. He was watching Anna with frequent stealthy and sombre glances. Miss Ellicot could not be sure even that he had been listening. He had the air of a man curiously absorbed.

Anna rose a few minutes before the general company. As though to bear witness to the truth of Miss Ellicot's grave charges, Sydney and Brendon also vacated their places. To reach the door they had to pass the end of the table, and behind the chair where Mr. Hill was seated. He rose deliberately to his feet and confronted them.

"I should like to speak to you for a few minutes," he said to Anna, dropping his voice a little. "It is no good playing a game. We had better have it over."

She eyed him scornfully. In any place her beauty would have been an uncommon thing. Here, where every element of her surroundings was tawdry and commonplace, and before this young man of vulgar origin and appearance, it was striking.

"I do not know you," she said coldly. "I have nothing to say to you."

He stood before the door. Brendon made a quick movement forward. She laid her hand upon his arm.

"Please don't," she said. "It really is not necessary. Be so good as to let me pass, sir," she added, looking her obstructor steadily in the face.

He hesitated.

"This is all rot!" he declared angrily. "You can't think that I'm fool enough to be put off like this."



"'I DO NOT KNOW YOU,' SHE SAID COLDLY."

Anna the Adventuress. [*Page* 142

She glanced at Brendon, who stood by her side, tall and threatening. Her eyebrows were lifted in expostulation. A faint, delightfully humorous smile parted her lips.

"After all," she said, "if this person will not be reasonable, I am afraid——"

It was enough. A hand of iron fell upon the scowling young man's shoulder.

"Be so good as to stand away from that door at once, sir," Brendon ordered.

Hill lost a little of his truculency. He knew very well that his muscles were flabby, and his nerve by no means what it should be. He was no match for Brendon. He yielded his place and struck instead with his tongue. He turned to Mrs. White.

"I'm sorry, m'am, to seem the cause of any disturbance, but this," he pointed to Anna, "is my wife."

The sensation produced was gratifying enough. The man's statement was explicit, and spoken with confidence. Every one looked at Anna. For a moment she too had started and faltered in her exit from the room. Her fingers clutched the side of the door as though to steady herself. She caught her breath, and her eyes were lit with a sudden terror. She recovered herself, however, with amazing facility. Scarcely any one noticed the full measure of her consternation. From the threshold she looked her accuser steadily and coldly in the face.

"What you have said is a ridiculous falsehood," she declared scornfully. "I do not even know who you are."

She swept out of the room. Hill would have

followed her, but Mrs. White and Miss Ellicot laid each a hand upon his arm, one on either side. The echoes of his hard, unpleasant laugh reached Anna on her way upstairs.

CHAPTER XVII

MR. MONTAGUE HILL MAKES HIMSELF OBJECTIONABLE

IT was a queer little bed-sitting-room almost in the roof, with a partition right across it. As usual Brendon lit the candles, and Sydney dragged out the spirit-lamp and set it going. Anna opened a cupboard and produced cups and saucers and a tin of coffee.

"Only four spoonsful left," she declared briskly, "and your turn to buy the next pound, Sydney."

"Right!" he answered. "I'll bring it to-morrow. Fresh ground, no chicory, and all the rest of it. But—Miss Pellissier!"

"Well?"

"Are you quite sure that you want us this evening? Wouldn't you rather be alone? Just say the word, and we'll clear out like a shot."

She laughed softly.

"You are afraid," she said, "that the young man who thinks that he is my husband has upset me."

"Madman!"

"Blithering ass!"

The girl looked into the two indignant faces and held out both her hands.

"You're very nice, both of you," she said gently. "But I'm afraid you are going to be in a hopeless minority here as regards me."

They eyed her incredulously.

"You can't imagine," Sydney exclaimed, "that the people downstairs will be such drivelling asses as to believe piffle like that."

Anna measured out the coffee. Her eyes were lit with a gleam of humour. After all, it was really rather funny.

"Well, I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "I always notice that people find it very easy to believe what they want to believe, and you see I'm not in the least popular. Miss Ellicot, for instance, considers me a most improper person."

"Miss Ellicot! That old cat!" Sydney exclaimed indignantly.

"Miss Ellicot!" Brendon echoed. "As if it could possibly matter what such a person thinks of you."

Anna laughed outright.

"You are positively eloquent to-night—both of you," she declared. "But, you see, appearances are very much against me. He knew my name, and also that I had been living in Paris, and a man doesn't risk claiming a girl for his wife, as a rule, for nothing. He was painfully in earnest, too. I think you will find that his story will be believed, whatever I say; and in any case, if he is going to stay on here, I shall have to go away."

"Don't say that," Sydney begged. "We will see that he never annoys you."

Anna shook her head.

"He is evidently a friend of Mrs. White's," she said, "and if he is going to persist in this delusion, we cannot both remain here. I'd rather not go," she added. "This is much the cheapest place I know of where things are moderately clean, and

I should hate rooms all by myself. Dear me, what a nuisance it is to have a pseudo husband shot down upon one from the skies."

"And such a beast of a one," Sydney remarked vigorously.

Brendon looked across the room at her thoughtfully.

"I wonder," he said, "is there anything we could do to help you to get rid of him?"

"Can you think of anything?" Anna answered. "I can't! He appears to be a most immovable person."

Brandon hesitated for a moment. He was a little embarrassed.

"There ought to be some means of getting at him," he said. "The fellow seems to know your name, Miss Pellissier, and that you have lived in Paris. Might we ask you if you have ever seen him, if you knew him at all before this evening?"

She stood up suddenly, and turning her back to them, looked steadily out of the window. Below was an uninspiring street, a thoroughfare of boarding-houses and apartments. The steps, even the pavements, were invaded by little knots of loungers driven outside by the unusual heat of the evening, most of them in evening dress, or what passed for evening dress in Montague Street. The sound of their strident voices floated upwards, the high nasal note of the predominant Americans, the shrill laughter of girls quick to appreciate the wit of such of their male companions as thought it worth while to be amusing. A young man was playing the banjo. In the distance a barrel-organ was grinding out a *pot pourri* of popular airs. Anna raised her eyes. Above the housetops it was different.

She drew a long breath. After all, why need one look down. Always the other things remained.

"I think," she said, "that I would rather not have anything to say about that man."

"It isn't necessary," they both declared breathlessly.

Brendon dismissed the subject with a wave of the hand. He glanced at his watch.

"Let us walk round to Covent Garden," he suggested. "I daresay the gallery will be full, but there is always the chance, and I know you two are keen on Melba."

The girl shook her head.

"Not to-night," she said. "I have to go out."

They hesitated. As a rule their comings and goings were discussed with perfect confidence, but on this occasion they both felt that there was intent in her silence as to her destination. Nevertheless Sydney, clumsily but earnestly, had something to say about it.

"I am afraid—I really think that one of us ought to go with you," he said. "That beast of a fellow is certain to be hanging about."

She shook her head.

"It is a secret mission," she declared. "There are policemen—and omnibuses."

"You shall not need either," Brendon said grimly. "We will see that he doesn't follow you."

She thanked him with a look and rose to her feet.

"Go down and rescue the rags of my reputation," she said, smiling. "I expect it is pretty well in shreds by now. To-morrow morning I shall have made up my mind what to do."

* * * * *

" I must confess," Mr. Carter said, pursing out his lips in a manner peculiar to him, " that the young lady has always been an object of some suspicion to me."

" The way she monopolizes—has always monopolized those two young men is most barefaced," Miss Ellicot declared. " Still, one must not be uncharitable. I wish it were possible to get rid of one's suspicions."

" Her references," Mrs. White said anxiously, " were really excellent."

Miss Ellicot smiled. Mr. Carter also smiled. Mrs. Bodham shook her head solemnly.

" References are so easy, my dear Mrs. White," she said.

Mr. Bullding gulped down his coffee and grunted audibly.

" God bless my soul," he said, " what's wrong with the girl. Scarcely spoken a word to her in my life, but if it's her story against Hill's, give her a chance, I say."

Hill himself at that moment entered. He was carrying in his hand a folded paper. He addressed himself to Mrs. White.

" I've brought you this document to look at, ma'am," he said. " Read it through, and show it to all the other ladies and gentlemen, if you like. I'm not asking you to take my word against any one's. There's proof—all the proof that any sane person can need."

Mr. Carter made his way to Mrs. White's side. His eyes were bright with curiosity. With twitching fingers he drew from his pocket a pair of spectacles and hastily adjusted them.

" Dear, dear me, what's this ? " he exclaimed.

"What's this? Upon my word, a marriage certificate. It is indeed—a marriage certificate."

The young man stood with his hands in his trousers pocket, an unlit cigar in the corner of his mouth.

"Read it," he said. "Read it, all of you. I don't mind. Nothing secret about me. Montague Hill—that's my name—and Annabel Pellissier—commonly known as Anna, I believe. Married at the British Embassy at Paris. Bit swagger that, you know, and cost me a pretty penny. What's the odds, though? Montague Hill's no pauper—no, sir."

He bit off the end of his cigar, and stretched out his hand for the paper, which Mrs. White held towards him. Mr. Carter, however, was quick to seize it.

"Dear, dear me!" he exclaimed, pursing out his lips. "It is indeed a marriage certificate. Montague Hill, bachelor, and Annabel Pellissier, spinster. All quite correct. My dear sir, you have my sympathy."

"Don't want it," the young man declared brusquely. "Give me the paper."

Mr. Carter parted with it reluctantly. He took a long time folding it up, and Mr. Hill at last snatched it unceremoniously from his hands. Brendon and Courtlaw entered at that moment. Their appearance was so unexpected and so unusual that there was a moment's silence. Then Miss Ellicot, with a thin little smile, motioned to them to join her on the sofa.

"Dear, dear me! Isn't this a sad thing?" she exclaimed, "and you all such friends too."

Brendon stretched out his long legs, and looked thoughtfully at his toes.

"Isn't what sad?" he asked calmly.

"Why, this affair about Miss Pellissier—or Mrs. Hill, as I suppose we must call her. To think that we never suspected it! But perhaps you two knew. Such friends as you have been. I daresay she told you all about it."

"All about what?" Brendon asked again.

"Why, her marriage, of course," Miss Ellicot said calmly.

They both looked at her.

"Surely," Brendon exclaimed, "nobody here can honestly believe that ridiculous story."

"Fancy," Sydney Courtlaw remarked, "a girl like Miss Pellissier married to a bounder like that fellow Hill. Can't think how he had the nerve to try it on, even for a bluff."

Miss Ellicot sighed, and looked demurely into her lap.

"Dear me, I thought that you knew," she murmured. "We have all been shockingly deceived, Mr. Brendon. Mr. Hill's story is perfectly true. He has the marriage certificate here. We have all seen it."

Brendon laughed scornfully.

"Fifty marriage certificates would never convince me," he declared, "that Miss Pellissier was ever married to, or even thought of marrying, a fellow like Hill. Why, he isn't a gentleman—hasn't even the outward appearance of one. His story is absurd on the very face of it."

"Absurd!" Sydney muttered. "It's damned ridiculous," he added, under his breath.

"You are very foolish," Miss Ellicot said sharply. "People don't forge marriage certificates nowadays."

The young man turned away from Mrs. White, and glanced truculently towards them.

"What's that about forging marriage certificates?" he asked.

Miss Ellicot smiled up at him sweetly.

"It is nothing, Mr. Hill," she declared. "Only I cannot persuade Mr. Brendon and Mr. Courtlaw here, who are great friends of Miss Pellissier, that she is really married to you."

Hill looked at them with darkening face.

"I don't know as it matters," he said slowly. "I don't know as it matters either way. But I don't want to hear anything about forgery, or there'll be trouble. If a properly stamped and witnessed legal document ain't to be believed—well, it isn't likely that anything I could say would convince them."

"You are quite right, Mr. Hill," Brendon said coolly. "Neither your document nor anything you could say would ever induce me to believe your story. Put it away, please. Pray, don't waste your time showing it to me."

"I wasn't going to," Hill declared. "What you believe, or don't believe, wouldn't trouble me in the least. Facts are facts, and I can prove all I say, as you'll know before long."

The door leading into the hall stood wide open. Hill turned suddenly towards it. Brendon, even more quick in his movements, blocked the way. Anna had descended the stairs, and was passing along the passage.

"Here, let me pass!" Hill exclaimed.

Sydney joined Brendon. Every one in the room regarded the three young men with breathless interest.

"I think not," Brendon said coolly. "You have made yourself objectionable enough already to Miss Pellissier. Sit down, please."

"But I won't sit down," Hill declared, fuming. "What right have you to interfere between a man and his wife, eh?"

"Fiddlesticks," Brendon declared scornfully.

"Rot!" Sydney echoed.

Hill pushed forward.

"I'll show you whether it's rot or not," he exclaimed furiously.

He found himself suddenly in the grasp of a giant. He was set down gently upon a chair, and he felt as though all the breath had been shaken out of his body. Outside in the street an omnibus had stopped to pick up a passenger. Glancing over his shoulder, Brendon saw Anna climbing briskly up the stairs to the top.

CHAPTER XVIII

A MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE

ANNA looked about her admiringly. It was just such a bedroom as she would have chosen for herself. The colouring was green and white, with softly shaded electric lights, an alcove bedstead, which was a miracle of daintiness, white furniture, and a long low dressing-table littered all over with a multitude of daintily fashioned toilet appliances. Through an open door was a glimpse of the bath-room—a vision of luxury, out of which Annabel herself, in a wonderful dressing-gown and followed by a maid, presently appeared.

"Too bad to keep you waiting," Annabel exclaimed. "I'm really very sorry. Collins, you can go now. I will ring if I want you."

The maid discreetly withdrew, and Anna stood transfixed, gazing with puzzled frown at her sister.

"Annabel! Why, what on earth have you been doing to yourself, child?" she exclaimed.

Annabel laughed a little uneasily.

"The very question, my dear sister," she said, "tells me that I have succeeded. Dear me, what a difference it has made! No one would ever think that we were sisters. Don't you think that the shade of my hair is lovely?"

"There is nothing particular the matter with the

shade," Anna answered, "but it is not nearly so becoming as before you touched it. And what on earth do you want to darken your eyebrows and use cosmetics for at your age? You're exactly twenty-three, and you're got up as much as a woman of forty-five."

Annabel shrugged her shoulders.

"I only use the weeniest little dab of rouge," she declared, "and it is really necessary, because I want to get rid of the 'pallor effect.' Do you remember when we were both called the 'Moonlight Madonnas?' And, you know, nowadays it is *piquante* to make up, if you don't really need to. Men like it."

Anna made no remark. Her disapproval was obvious enough. Annabel saw it, and suddenly changed her tone.

"You are very stupid, Anna," she said. "Can you not understand? It is of no use your taking my identity and all the burden of my iniquities upon your dear shoulders if I am to be recognized the moment I show my face in London. That is why I have dyed my hair, that is why I have abandoned my rôle of *ingenuèe* and altered my whole style of dress. Upon my word, Anna," she declared, with a strange little laugh, "you are a thousand times more like me as I was two months ago than I am myself."

A sudden sense of the gravity of this thing came home to Anna. Her sister's word's were true. They had changed identities absolutely. It was not for a week or a month. It was for ever. A cold shiver came over her. That last year in Paris, when Annabel and she had lived in different worlds, had often been a nightmare to her. Annabel had taken her life into her hands with gay *insouciance*, had

made her own friends, gone her own way. Anna never knew whither it had led her—sometimes she had fears. It was her past now, not Annabel's. And somehow she fancied that even then the faint smile which was parting her sister's lips was inspired by some secret knowledge, some grimly humorous reflection as to the nature of that burden which henceforth was hers. It was absurd to give way to such phantasies. Nevertheless Annabel's smile tortured her.

"It is very good of you to come and see me, my dear sister," Annabel remarked, throwing herself into a low chair, and clasping her hands over her head. "To tell you the truth, I am a little dull."

"Where is your husband?" Anna asked.

"He is addressing a meeting of his constituents somewhere," Annabel answered. "I do not suppose he will be home till late. Tell me how are you amusing yourself?"

Anna laughed.

"I have been amusing myself up to now by trying to earn my living," she replied.

"I hope," Annabel answered lazily, "that you have succeeded. By-the-bye, do you want any money? Sir John's ideas of pin money are not exactly princely, but I can manage what you want, I dare say."

"Thank you," Anna answered coldly. "I am not in need of any. I might add that in any case I should not touch Sir John's."

"That's rather a pity," Annabel said. "He wants to settle something on you, I believe. It is really amusing. He lives in constant dread of a re-appearance of '*La Belle Alcide*,' and hearing it said that she is his wife's sister. Bit priggish, isn't it?



"'I CAME,' ANNA ANSWERED, 'TO HEAR ALL THAT YOU CAN TELL ME ABOUT A MAN NAMED HILL.'"

Anna, the Adventuress. [*Page* 157

And if he only knew it—so absurd. Tell me how you are earning your living here, Anna—typewriting, or painting, or lady's companion ? "

" I think," Anna said, " that the less you know about me the better. Is all your house on the same scale of magnificence as this, Annabel ? " she asked, looking round.

Annabel shook her head.

" Most of it is ugly and frowsy," she declared, " but it isn't worth talking about. I have made up my mind to insist upon moving from here into Park Lane, or one of the Squares. It is absolutely a frightful neighbourhood, this. If only you could see the people who have been to call on me ! Sir John has the most absurd ideas, too. He won't have men-servants inside the house, and his collection of carriages is only fit for a museum—where most of his friends ought to be, by-the-bye. I can assure you, Anna, it will take me years to get decently established. The man's as obstinate as a mule."

Anna looked at her steadily.

" He will find it difficult, no doubt, to alter his style of living," she said. " I do not blame him. I hope you will always remember——"

Annabel held out her hands with a little cry of protest.

" No lecturing, Anna ! " she exclaimed. " I hope you have not come for that."

" I came," Anna answered, looking her sister steadily in the face, " to hear all that you can tell me about a man named Hill."

Annabel had been lying curled up on the lounge, the personification of graceful animal ease. At Anna's words she seemed suddenly to stiffen. Her softly intertwined fingers became rigid. The little

spot of rouge was vivid enough now by reason of this new pallor, which seemed to draw the colour even from her lips. But she did not speak. She made no attempt to answer her sister's question. Anna looked at her curiously, and with sinking heart.

"You must answer me, Annabel," she continued. "You must tell me the truth, please. It is necessary."

Annabel rose slowly to her feet, walked to the door as though to see that it was shut, and came back with slow lagging footsteps.

"There was a man called Montague Hill," she said hoarsely, "but he is dead."

"Then there is also," Anna remarked, "a Montague Hill who is very much alive. Not only that, but he is here in London. I have just come from him."

Annabel no longer attempted to conceal her emotion. She battled with a deadly faintness, and she tottered rather than walked back to her seat. Anna, quitting her chair, dropped on her knees by her sister's side and took her hand.

"Do not be frightened, dear," she said. "You must tell me the truth, and I will see that no harm comes to you."

"The only Montague Hill I ever knew," Annabel said slowly, "is dead. I know he is dead. I saw him lying on the footway. I felt his heart. It had ceased to beat. It was a motor accident—a fatal motor accident the evening papers called it. They could not have called it a fatal motor accident if he had not been dead."

Anna nodded.

"Yes, I remember," she said. "It was the night you left Paris. They thought that he was dead at

first, and they took him to the hospital. I believe that his recovery was considered almost miraculous."

"Alive," Annabel moaned, her eyes large with terror. "You say that he is alive."

"He is certainly alive," Anna declared. "More than that, he arrived to-day at the boarding-house where I am staying, greeted me with a theatrical start, and claimed me—as his wife. That is why I am here. You must tell me what it all means."

"And you?" Anna exclaimed. "What did you say?"

"Well, I considered myself justified in denying it," Anna answered drily. "He produced what he called a marriage certificate, and I believe that nearly every one in the boarding-house, including Mrs. White, my landlady, believes his story. I am fairly well hardened in iniquity—your iniquity, Annabel—but I decline to have a husband thrust upon me. I really cannot have anything to do with Mr. Montague Hill."

"A—marriage certificate!" Annabel gasped.

Anna glanced into her sister's face, and rose to her feet.

"Let me get you some water, Annabel. Don't be frightened, dear. Remember——"

Annabel clutched her sister's arm. She would not let her move. She seemed smitten with a paroxysm of fear.

"A thick-set, coarse-looking young man, Anna!" she exclaimed in a hoarse excited whisper. "He has a stubbly yellow moustache, weak eyes, and great horrid hands."

Anna nodded.

"It is the same man, Annabel," she said. "There

is no doubt whatever about that. There was the motor accident, too. It is the same man, for he raved in the hospital, and they fetched me. It was you, of course, whom he wanted."

"Alive! In London!" Annabel moaned.

"Yes. Pull yourself together, Annabel! I must have the truth."

The girl on the lounge drew a long sobbing breath.

"You shall," she said. "Listen! There was a Meysey Hill in Paris, an American railway millionaire. This man and he were alike, and about the same age. Montague Hill was taken for the millionaire once or twice, and I suppose it flattered his vanity. At any rate, he began to deliberately personate him. He sent me flowers. Celeste introduced him to me—oh, how Celeste hated me! She must have known. He—wanted to marry me. Just then—I was nervous. I had gone further than I meant to—with some Englishmen. I was afraid of being talked about. You don't know, Anna, but when one is in danger one realizes that the—the other side of the line is Hell. The man was mad to marry me. I heard everywhere of his enormous riches and his generosity. I consented. We went to the Embassy. There was—a service. Then he took me out to Monteaux, on a motor. We were to have breakfast there and return in the evening. On the way he confessed. He was a London man of business, spending a small legacy in Paris.' He had heard me sing—the fool thought himself in love with me. Celeste he knew. She was chaffing him about being taken for Meysey Hill, and suggested that he should be presented to me as the millionaire. He told me with a coarse nervous laugh. I was his wife. We were to live in some wretched London

suburb. His salary was a few paltry hundreds a year. Anna, I listened to all that he had to say, and I called to him to let me get out. He laughed. I tried to jump, but he increased the speed. We were going at a mad pace. I struck him across the mouth, and across the eyes. He lost control of the machine. I jumped then—I was not even shaken. I saw the motor dashed to pieces against the wall, and I saw him pitched on his head into the road. I leaned over and looked at him. He was quite still. I could not hear his heart beat. I thought that he was dead. I stole away and walked to the railway station. That night in Paris I saw on the bills 'Fatal Motor Accidents.' *Le Petit Journal* said that the man was dead. I was afraid that I might be called upon as a witness. That is why I was so anxious to leave Paris. The man who came to our rooms, you know, that night was his friend."

"The good God!" Anna murmured, herself shaken with fear. "You were married to him!"

"It could not be legal," Annabel moaned. "It couldn't be. I thought that I was marrying Meysey Hill, not that creature. We stepped from the Embassy into the motor—and oh! I thought that he was dead. Why didn't he die?"

Anna sprang to her feet and walked restlessly up and down the room. Annabel watched her with wide-open, terrified eyes.

"You won't give me away, Anna. He would never recognize me now. You are much more like what I was then."

Anna stopped in front of her.

"You don't propose, do you," she said quietly, "that I should take this man for my husband?"

"You can drive him away," Annabel cried. "Tell him that he is mad. Go and live somewhere else."

"In his present mood," Anna remarked, "he would follow me."

"Oh, you are strong and brave," Annabel murmured. "You can keep him at arm's length. Besides, it was under false pretences. He told me that he was a millionaire. It could not be a legal marriage."

"I am very much afraid," Anna answered, "that it was. It might be upset. I am wondering whether it would not be better to tell your husband everything. You will never be happy with this hanging over you."

Annabel moistened her dry lips with a handkerchief steeped in eau de Cologne.

"You don't know him, Anna," she said with a little shudder, "or you would not talk like that. He is steeped in the conventions. Every slight action is influenced by what he imagines would be the opinion of other people. Anything in the least irregular is like poison to him. He has no imagination, no real generosity. You might tell the truth to some men, but never to him."

Anna was thoughtful. A conviction that her sister's words were true had from the first possessed her.

"Annabel," she said slowly, "if I fight this thing out myself, can I trust you that it will not be a vain sacrifice? After what you have said it is useless for us to play with words. You do not love your husband, you have married him for a position—to escape from—things which you feared. Will you be a faithful and honest wife? Will you do your

duty by him, and forget all your past follies? Unless, Annabel, you can——"

"Oh, I will pledge you my word," Annabel cried passionately, "my solemn word. Believe me, Anna. Oh, you must believe me. I have been very foolish, but it is over."

"Remember that you are young still, and fond of admiration," Anna said. "You will not give Sir John any cause for jealousy? You will have no secrets from him except—concerning those things which are past?"

"Anna, I swear it!" her sister sobbed.

"Then I will do what I can," Anna promised. "I believe that you are quite safe. He has had brain fever since, and, as you say, I am more like what you were then than you yourself are now. I don't think for a moment that he would recognize you."

Annabel clutched her sister's hands. The tears were streaming down her face, her voice was thick with sobs.

"Anna, you are the dearest, bravest sister in the world," she cried. "Oh, I can't thank you. You dear, dear girl. I—listen."

They heard a man's voice outside.

"Sir John!" Annabel gasped.

Anna sprang to her feet and made for the dressing-room door.

"One moment, if you please!"

She stopped short and looked round. Sir John stood upon the threshold.

CHAPTER XIX

THE DISCOMFITURE OF SIR JOHN

SIR JOHN looked from one to the other of the two sisters. His face darkened.

"My arrival appears to be opportune," he said stiffly. "I was hoping to be able to secure a few minutes' conversation with you, Miss Pellissier. Perhaps my wife has already prepared you for what I wish to say."

"Not in the least," Anna answered calmly. "We have scarcely mentioned your name."

Sir John coughed. He looked at Annabel, whose face was buried in her hands—he looked back at Anna, who was regarding him with an easy composure which secretly irritated him.

"It is concerning—our future relations," Sir John pronounced ponderously.

"Indeed!" Anna answered indifferently. "That sounds interesting."

Sir John frowned. Anna was unimpressed. Elegant, a little scornful, she leaned slightly against the back of a chair and looked him steadily in the eyes.

"I have no wish," he said, "to altogether ignore the fact that you are my wife's sister, and have therefore a certain claim upon me."

Anna's eyes opened a little wider, but she said nothing.

"A claim," he continued, "which I am quite prepared to recognize. It will give me great pleasure to settle an annuity for a moderate amount upon you on certain conditions."

"A—what ?" Anna asked.

"An annuity—a sum of money paid to you yearly or quarterly through my solicitors, and which you can consider as a gift from your sister. The conditions are such as I think you will recognize the justice of. I wish to prevent a repetition of any such errand as I presume you have come here upon this evening. I cannot have my wife distressed or worried."

"May I ask," Anna said softly, "what you presume to have been the nature of my errand here this evening ?"

Sir John pointed to Annabel, who was as yet utterly limp.

"I cannot but conclude," he said, "that your errand involved the recital to my wife of some trouble in which you find yourself. I should like to add that if a certain amount is needed to set you free from any debts you may have contracted, in addition to this annuity, you will not find me unreasonable."

Anna glanced momentarily towards her sister, but Annabel neither spoke nor moved.

"With regard to the conditions I mentioned," Sir John continued, gaining a little confidence from Anna's silence, "I think you will admit that they are not wholly unreasonable. I should require you to accept no employment whatever upon the stage, and to remain out of England."

Anna's demeanour was still imperturbable, her marble pallor untinged by the slightest flush of colour. She regarded him coldly, as though wondering whether he had anything further to say. Sir John hesitated, and then continued.

"I trust," he said, "that you will recognize the justice of these conditions. Under happier circumstances nothing would have given me more pleasure than to have offered you a home with your sister. You yourself, I am sure, recognize how impossible you have made it for me now to do anything of the sort. I may say that the amount of the annuity I propose to allow you is two hundred a year."

Anna looked for a moment steadily at her sister, whose face was still averted. Then she moved towards the door. Before she passed out she turned and faced Sir John. The impassivity of her features changed at last. Her eyes were lit with mirth, the corners of her mouth quivered.

"Really, Sir John," she said, "I don't know how to thank you. I can understand now these newspapers when they talk of your magnificent philanthropy. It is magnificent indeed. And yet —you millionaires should really, I think, cultivate the art of discrimination. I am so much obliged to you for your projected benevolence. Frankly, it is the funniest thing which has ever happened to me in my life. I shall like to think of it—whenever I feel dull. Good-bye, Anna!"

Annabel sprang up. Sir John waved her back.

"Do I understand you then to refuse my offer?" he asked Anna.

She shot a sudden glance at him. Sir John felt hot and furious. It was maddening to be made to

feel that he was in any way the inferior of this cool, self-possessed young woman, whose eyes seemed for a moment to scintillate with scorn. There were one or two bitter moments in his life when he had been made to feel that gentility laid on with a brush may sometimes crack and show weak places—that deportment and breeding are after all things apart. Anna went out.

* * * * *

Her cheeks burned for a moment or two when she reached the street, although she held her head upright and walked blithely, even humming to herself fragments of an old French song. And then at the street corner she came face to face with Nigel Ennison.

"I won't pretend," he said, "that this is an accident. The fates are never so kind to me. As a matter of fact I have been waiting for you."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Really," she said. "And by what right do you do anything of the sort?"

"No right at all," he admitted. "Only it is much too late for you to be out alone. You have been to see your sister, of course. How is she?"

"My sister is quite well, thank you," she answered. "Would you mind calling that hansom for me?"

He looked at it critically and shook his head.

"You really couldn't ride in it," he said, deprecatingly. "The horse's knees are broken, and I am not sure that the man is sober. I would sooner see you in a 'bus again."

She laughed.

"Do you mean to say that you have been here ever since I came?"

"I am afraid that I must confess it," he answered. "Idiotic, isn't it?"

"Absolutely," she agreed coldly. "I wish you would not do it."

"Would not do what?"

"Well, follow omnibuses from Russell Square to Hampstead."

"I can assure you," he answered, "that it isn't a habit of mine. But seriously——"

"Well, seriously?"

"Isn't it your own fault a little? Why do you not tell me your address, and allow me to call upon you."

"Why should I? I have told you that I do not wish for acquaintances in London."

"Perhaps not in a general way," he answered calmly. "You are quite right, I think. Only I am not an acquaintance at all. I am an old friend, and I decline to be shelved."

"Would you mind telling me," Anna asked, "how long I knew you in Paris?"

He looked at her sideways. There was nothing to be learned from her face.

"Well," he said slowly, "I had met you three times—before Drummond's dinner."

"Oh, Drummond's dinner!" she repeated. "You were there, were you?"

He laughed a little impatiently.

"Isn't that rather a strange question—under the circumstances?" he asked quietly.

Her cheeks flushed a dull red. She felt that there was a hidden meaning under his words. Yet her embarrassment was only a passing thing. She dismissed the whole subject with a little shrug of the shoulders.

"We are both of us trenching upon forbidden ground," she said. "It was perhaps my fault. You have not forgotten——"

"I have forgotten nothing?" he answered, enigmatically.

Anna hailed an omnibus. He looked at her reproachfully. The omnibus however was full. They fell into step again. More than ever a sense of confusion was upon Ennison.

"Last time I saw you," he reminded her, "you spoke, did you not, of obtaining some employment in London."

"Quite true," she answered briskly, "and thanks to you I have succeeded."

"Thanks to me," he repeated, puzzled. "I don't understand."

"No? But it is very simple. It was you who were so much amazed that I did not try—the music hall stage here."

"You must admit," he declared, "that to us—who had seen you—the thought of your trying anything else was amazing."

"At any rate," she declared, "your remark decided me. I have an engagement with a theatrical agent—I believe for the 'Unusual.'"

"You are going to sing in London?" he said quietly.

"Yes."

For a moment or two he did not speak. Glancing towards him she saw that a shadow had fallen upon his face.

"Tell me," she insisted, "why you look like that. You are afraid—that here in London—I shall not be a success. It is that, is it not?"

"No," he answered readily. "It is not that.

The idea of your being a failure would never have occurred to me."

"Then why are you sorry that I am going to the 'Unusual'? I do not understand."

Their eyes met for a moment. His face was very serious.

"I am sorry," he said slowly. "Why, I do not know."

"I positively insist upon knowing," she declared cheerfully. "The sooner you tell me the better."

"It is very hard to explain," he answered. "I think that it is only an idea. Only you seem to me since the time when I knew you in Paris to have changed—to have changed in some subtle manner which I find at times utterly bewildering. I find you an impenetrable enigma. I find it impossible to associate you with—my little friend of the Ambassador's. The things she said and did from you—seem impossible. I had a sort of idea," he went on, "that you were starting life all over again, and it seemed awfully plucky."

There was a long silence. Then Anna spoke more seriously than usual.

"I think," she said, "that I rather like what you have said. Don't be afraid to go on thinking it. Even though I am going to sing at the 'Unusual' you may find that the 'Alcide,' whom you knew in Paris does not exist any more. At the same time," she added, in a suddenly altered tone, "it isn't anything whatever to do with you, is it?"

"Why not?" he answered. "You permitted me then to call you my friend. I do not intend to allow you to forget."

They passed a man who stared at them curiously. Ennison started and looked anxiously at Anna. She was quite unconcerned.

"Did you see who that was?" he asked in a low tone.

"I did not recognize him," Anna answered. "I supposed that he took off his hat to you."

"It was Cheveney!" he said slowly.

"Cheveney!" she repeated. "I do not know any one of that name."

He caught her wrist and turned her face towards him. Her eyes were wide open with amazement.

"Mr. Ennison!"

He released her.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "Who are you —Annabel Pellissier or her ghost?"

Anna laughed.

"If it is a choice between the two," she answered, "I must be Annabel Pellissier. I am certainly no ghost."

"You have her face and figure," he muttered. "You have even her name. Yet you can look Cheveney in the face and declare that you do not know him. You have changed from the veriest butterfly to a woman—you wear different clothes, you have the air of another world. If you do not help me to read the riddle of yourself, Annabel, I think that very soon I shall be a candidate for the asylum."

She laughed heartily, and became as suddenly grave.

"So Mr. Cheveney was another Paris friend, was he?" she asked.

"Don't befool me any more," he answered, almost roughly. "If any one should know—— you

should! He was your friend. We were only—*les autres.*"

"That is quite untrue," she declared cheerfully. "I certainly knew him no better than you."

"Then he—and Paris—lied," Ennison answered.

"That," she answered, "is far easier to believe. You are too credulous."

Ennison had things to say, but he looked at her and held his tongue. They turned the last corner, and almost immediately a man who had been standing there turned and struck Ennison a violent blow on the cheek. Ennison reeled, and almost fell. Recovering himself quickly his instinct of self-defence was quicker than his recollection of Anna's presence. He struck out from the shoulder, and the man measured his length upon the pavement.

Anna sprang lightly away across the street. Brendon and Courtlaw who had been watching for her, met her at the door. She pointed across the road.

"Please go and see that—nothing happens," she pleaded.

"It is the first moment we have let him out of our sight," Brendon exclaimed, as he hastened across the street.

Hill sat up on the pavement and mopped the blood from his cheek. Ennison's signet-ring had, cut nearly to the bone.

"What the devil do you mean by coming for me like that?" Ennison exclaimed, glowering down upon him. "Serves you right if I'd cracked your skull."

Hill looked up at him, an unkempt, rough-looking



"A MAN [illegible] STRUCK ENNISON A VIOLENT BLOW ON THE CHEEK."

[illegible] [Page 172

object, with broken collar, tumbled hair, and the blood slowly dripping from his face.

"What do you mean, hanging round with my wife?" he answered fiercely.

Ennison looked down on him in disgust.

"You silly fool," he said. "I know nothing about your wife. The young lady I was with is not married at all. Why don't you make sure before you rush out like that upon a stranger?"

"You were with my wife," Hill repeated sullenly. "I suppose you're like the rest of them. Call her Miss Pellissier, eh? I tell you she's my wife, and I've got the certificate in my pocket."

"I don't know who you are," Ennison said quietly, "but you are a thundering liar."

Hill staggered to his feet and drew a folded paper from his pocket.

"Marriage certificates don't tell lies, at any rate," he said. "Just look that through, will you."

Ennison took the document, tore it half in two without looking at it, and flung it back in Hill's face. Then he turned on his heel and walked off.

CHAPTER XX

THE MARKSMANSHIP OF MONTAGUE HILL

"BY the bye," his neighbour asked him languidly, "who is our hostess?"

"Usually known, I believe, as Lady Ferringhall," Ennison answered, "unless I have mixed up my engagement list and come to the wrong house."

"How dull you are," the lady remarked. "Of course I mean, who was she?"

"I believe that her name was Pellissier," Ennison answered.

"Pellissier," she repeated thoughtfully. "There were some Hampshire Pellisiers."

"She is one of them," Ennison said.

"Dear me! I wonder where Sir John picked her up."

"In Paris, I think," Ennison answered. "Only married a few months ago and lived out at Hampstead."

"Heavens!" the lady exclaimed. "I heard they came from somewhere outrageous."

"Hampstead didn't suit Lady Ferringhall," Ennison remarked. "They have just taken this house from Lady Cellender."

"And what are you doing here?" the lady asked.

"Politics!" Ennison answered grimly. "And you?"

"Same thing. Besides, my husband has shares in Sir John's company. Do you know, I am beginning to believe that we only exist nowadays by the tolerance of these millionaire tradesmen. Our land brings us in nothing. We have to get them to let us in for the profits of their business, and in return we ask them to—dinner. By-the-bye, have you seen this new woman at the Empire? What is it they call her—Alcide?"

"Yes, I have seen her," Ennison answered.

"Every one raves about her," Lady Angela continued. "For my part I can see no difference in any of these French girls who come over here with their demure manner and atrocious songs."

"Alcide's songs are not atrocious," Ennison remarked.

Lady Angela shrugged her shoulders.

"It is unimportant," she said. "Nobody understands them, of course, but we all look as though we did. Something about this woman rather reminds me of our hostess."

Ennison thought so too half an hour later, when having cut out from one of the bridge tables he settled down for a chat with Annabel. Every now and then something familiar in her tone, the poise of her head, the play of her eyes startled him. Then he remembered that she was Anna's sister.

He lowered his voice a little and leaned over towards her.

"By-the-bye, Lady Ferringhall," he said, "do you know that I am a very great admirer of your

sister's? I wonder if she has ever spoken to you of me."

The change in Lady Ferringhall's manner was subtle but unmistakable. She answered him almost coldly.

"I see nothing of my sister," she said. "In Paris our lives were far apart, and we had seldom the same friends. I have heard of you from my husband. You are somebody's secretary, are you not?"

It was plain that the subject was distasteful to her, but Ennison, although famous in a small way for his social tact, did not at once discard it.

"You have not seen your sister lately," he remarked. "I believe that you would find her in some respects curiously altered. I have never in my life been so much puzzled by any one as by your sister. Something has changed her tremendously."

Annabel looked at him curiously.

"Do you mean in looks?" she asked.

"Not only that," he answered. "In Paris your sister appeared to me to be a charming student of frivolity. Here she seems to have developed into a brilliant woman with more character and steadfastness than I should ever have given her credit for. Her features are the same, yet the change has written its mark into her face. Do you know, Lady Ferringhall, I am proud that your sister permits me to call myself her friend."

"And in Paris——"

"In Paris," he interrupted, "she was a very delightful companion, but beyond that—one did not take her seriously. I am not boring you, am I?"

She raised her eyes to his and smiled into his face.

"You are not boring me," she said, "but I would rather talk of something else. I suppose you will think me very unsisterly and cold-hearted, but there are circumstances in connexion with my sister's latest exploit which are intensely irritating both to my husband and to myself."

He recognized the force, almost the passion, which trembled in her tone, and he at once abandoned the subject. He remained talking with her however. It was easy for him to see that she desired to be agreeable to him. They talked lightly but confidentially until Sir John approached them with a slight frown upon his face.

"Mr. Ennison," he said, "it is for you to cut in at Lady Angela's table. Anna, do you not see that the Countess is sitting alone?"

She rose, and flashed a quick smile upon Ennison behind her husband's back.

"You must come and see me some afternoon," she said to him.

He murmured his delight, and joined the bridge party, where he played with less than his accustomed skill. On the way home he was still thoughtful. He turned in at the club. They were talking of "Alcide," as they often did in those days.

"Heard the latest sensation, Ennison?" he was asked, on his entrance into the smoke-room.

"I have heard nothing," Ennison answered. "I have been to a political dinner, and I am weary. Besides, I have lost all my money at bridge. Will some one stand me a whisky and soda?"

Some one touched the bell. The man who had spoken to him first continued.

"You know the new woman at the Empire—

'Alcide.' Sings musical little French songs—lots of go in a very smart way——"

"Yes, yes," Ennison interrupted. "What about her?"

"Shot at to-night on the stage. Man said he was her husband. The audience got hold of him and mauled him badly. They had to take him to the hospital."

The lighted match which Ennison was holding to his cigarette fell from his fingers unheeded to the ground.

"Ann—Alcide," he exclaimed. "Was she hurt?"

"Not a scrap. Bullet grazed her shoulder. She came back and finished her song, and the audience nearly brought the house down. It it hadn't been such a near squeak for her one would have thought it was a plant."

Ennison struck another match, lit his cigarette, and relapsed into an easy chair. They talked still of "Alcide."

"She has improved her style," one declared. "Certainly her voice is far more musical."

Another differed.

"She has lost something," he declared, "something which brought the men in crowds around the stage at the 'Ambassador's.' I don't know what you'd call it—a sort of witchery, almost suggestiveness. She sings better perhaps. But I don't think she lays hold of one so."

"I will tell you what there is about her which is so fetching," Drummond, who was lounging by, declared. "She contrives somehow to strike the personal note in an amazing manner. You are wedged in amongst a crowd, perhaps in the prom-

enade, you lean over the back, you are almost out of sight. Yet you catch her eye—you can't seem to escape from it. You feel that that smile is for you, the words are for you, the whole song is for you. Naturally you shout yourself hoarse when she has finished, and feel jolly pleased with yourself."

"And if you are a millionaire like Drummond," some one remarked, "you send round a note and ask her to come out to supper."

"In the present case," Drummond remarked, glancing across the room, "Cheveney wouldn't permit it,"

Ennison dropped the evening paper which he had been pretending to read. Cheveney strolled up, a pipe in his mouth.

"Cheveney wouldn't have anything to say about it, as it happens," he remarked, a little grimly. "Ungracious little beast, I call her. I don't mind telling you chaps that except on the stage I haven't set eyes on her this side of the water. I've called half a dozen times at her flat, and she won't see me. Rank ingratitude, I call it."

There was a shout of laughter. Drummond patted him on the shoulder.

"Never mind, old chap," he declared. "Let's hope your successor is worthy of you."

"You fellows," Ennison said quietly, "are getting a little wild. I have known Miss Pellissier as long as any of you perhaps, and I have seen something of her since her arrival in London. I consider her a very charming young woman—and I won't hear a word about Paris, for there are things I don't understand about that, but I will stake my word upon it that to-day Miss Pellissier

is entitled not only to our admiration, but to our respect. I firmly believe that she is as straight as a die."

Ennison's voice shook a little. They were his friends, and they recognized his unusual earnestness. Drummond, who had been about to speak, refrained. Cheveney walked away with a shrug of the shoulders. Ennison looked around him and swore softly under his breath. After all, what a fool he was!

"I believe you are quite right so far as regards the present, at any rate," some one remarked, from the depths of an easy chair. "You see, her sister is married to Ferringhall, isn't she? and she herself must be drawing no end of a good screw here. I always say that it's poverty before everything that makes a girl skip the line."

Ennison escaped. He was afraid if he stayed that he would make a fool of himself. He walked through the misty September night to his rooms. On his way he made a slight divergence from the direct route and paused for a moment outside the flat where Anna was now living. It was nearly one o'clock; but there were lights still in all her windows. Suddenly the door of the flat opened and closed. A man came out, and walking recklessly, almost cannoned into Ennison. He mumbled an apology and then stopped short.

"It's Ennison, isn't it?" he exclaimed. "What the devil are you doing star-gazing here?"

Ennison looked at him in surprise.

"I might return the compliment, Courtlaw," he answered, "by asking why the devil you come lurching on to the pavement like a drunken man."

Courtlaw was pale and dishevelled. He was carelessly dressed, and there were marks of unrest upon his features. He pointed to where the lights still burned in Anna's windows.

"What do you think of that farce?" he exclaimed bitterly. "You are one of those who must know all about it. Was there ever such madness?"

"I am afraid that I don't understand," Ennison answered. "You seem to have come from Miss Pellissier's rooms. I had no idea even that she was a friend of yours."

Courtlaw laughed hardly. His eyes were red. He was in a curious state of desperation.

"Nor am I now," he answered. "I have spoken too many truths to-night. Why do women take to lies and deceit and trickery as naturally as a duck to water?"

"You are not alluding, I hope, to Miss Pellissier?" Ennison said stiffly.

"Why not? Isn't the whole thing a lie? Isn't her reputation, this husband of hers, the 'Alcide' business, isn't it all a cursed juggle? She hasn't the right to do it. I——"

He stopped short. He had the air of a man who has said too much. Ennison was deeply interested.

"I should like to understand you," he said. "I knew Miss Pellissier in Paris at the 'Ambassador's,' and I know her now, but I am convinced that there is some mystery in connexion with her change of life. She is curiously altered in many ways. Is there any truth, do you suppose, in this rumoured marriage?"

"I know nothing," Courtlaw answered hurriedly.

"Ask me nothing. I will not talk to you about Miss Pellissier or her affairs."

"You are not yourself to-night, Courtlaw," Ennison said. "Come to my rooms and have a drink."

Courtlaw refused brusquely, almost rudely.

"I am off to-night," he said. "I am going to America. I have work there. I ought to have gone long ago. Will you answer me a question first?"

"If I can," Ennison said.

"What were you doing outside Miss Pellissier's flat to-night? You were looking at her windows. Why? What is she to you?"

"I was there by accident," Ennison answered. "Miss Pellissier is nothing to me except a young lady for whom I have the most profound and respectful admiration."

Courtlaw laid his hand upon Ennison's shoulder. They were at the corner of Pall Mall now, and had come to a standstill.

"Take my advice," he said hoarsely. "Call it warning, if you like. Admire her as much as you choose—at a distance, No more. Look at me. You knew me in Paris. David Courtlaw. Well-balanced, sane, wasn't I? You never heard any one call me a madman? I'm pretty near being one now, and it's her fault. I've loved her for two years, I love her now. And I'm off to America, and if my steamer goes to the bottom of the Atlantic I'll thank the Lord for it."

He strode away and vanished in the gathering fog. Ennison stood still for a moment, swinging his latchkey upon his finger. Then he turned round and gazed thoughtfully at the particular

spot in the fog where Courtlaw had disappeared.

"I'm d——d if I understand this," he said thoughtfully. "I never saw Courtlaw with her—never heard her speak of him. He was going to tell me something—and he shut up. I wonder what it was."

CHAPTER XXI

"MY PSEUDO HUSBAND"

"I DON'T understand what it all means," Anna said wearily, as she threw open her furs, and sank into a low chair. "It was very horrid too. Such a stuffy little room, and a most impertinent lawyer—the person who got up and asked me all those questions."

Brendon stood opposite to her, upon the hearth-rug. His sudden affluence seemed scarcely to have contributed to his well-being. He looked older, and there were lines about his eyes. His speech too seemed to have become more grave and measured.

"He was bound over to keep the peace," he said. "On the whole I don't think that you can complain of the proceedings. The magistrate stopped that fellow who tried to cross-examine you."

"Does being bound over to keep the peace mean that he is to leave me alone altogether?" Anna asked.

"Not exactly that," Brendon answered. "There is nothing to prevent his speaking to you."

"He can still follow me about, then? pester me with his letters, glower at me from the street corners, hang about my door?"

"There is nothing," Brendon said, "to prevent him from doing all these things. They are annoying

enough, but they do not constitute an offence under the law."

Anna kicked a footstool from under her feet viciously.

"Then it is a very silly law," she declared. "Is there no way that I can get rid of him, Walter?"

"Yes," Brendon answered, "there is one way."

She looked up eagerly.

"Don't keep me in suspense. Do tell me how."

"Marry me!" Brendon said slowly.

Anna's face fell. Still she looked at him thoughtfully.

"That is impossible," she said. "You know that it is impossible."

"I do not," he answered firmly. "I know that you do not love me, if that is what you mean. Why should you? But then I do not believe that you have a very large capacity for sentimental affection. I can give you all the things which make life pleasant, and I can free from you this madman."

The old instincts reasserted themselves. Her lips curved into a smile.

"He would have me arrested for bigamy," she exclaimed. "What a muddle it would be!"

"I can only repeat what I have just said," he went on earnestly. "Whatever means I had to use I would keep my promise. I would free you from this man."

She shook her head.

"I would rather believe that you are only half in earnest," she said. "Please do not say anything more about it. I cannot afford to lose another friend."

"Friends are a help," he said doggedly, "a husband would be absolute protection. I am rich.

You know that. We would live where you like, how you like. And I would never ask you for more than you are prepared to give."

"It is impossible," she said firmly. "Last night I lost my best and oldest friend in this same manner. Why will you not believe me when I say that at present I do not intend to marry? There will come a time in my life, I suppose, when I shall feel differently about it. At present nothing would move me. Walter," she added, stretching out her hand towards him, "do forget about this. I am human enough, at any rate, to hate solitude, and I have so few friends. Do not let me lose you too."

He took her fingers and pressed them ever so slightly.

"You will not lose me," he answered. "I shall be always at your call."

A maid interrupted them. She carried a card upon a silver salver. Anna glanced at it and hesitated.

Mr. Montague Hill.

"You can show him in," she said suddenly. "Walter, you will stay, please. I am so thankful that you are here. You will stay, will you not? It is my pseudo husband."

"If you wish it," he answered gravely.

Mr. Montague Hill came in. He was dressed with obvious, too obvious care, according to his conception of the prevailing fashion. His trousers were a little light, and the diamond pin in his tie twinkled mercilessly. He carried a very glossy hat in his hand, and his manner was apparently intended to be conciliatory. When he saw Brendon he scowled.

"Well," said Anna good-humouredly. "You

wished to see me. I hope that you have come to apologize for your ridiculous behaviour."

"I wanted to see you," he said, slowly, "alone."

"Thank you," Anna answered, "but your previous deportment towards me has been such that I must beg to be excused. You know Mr. Brendon. He is my friend. Anything you have to say you can say before him."

"I don't want to say things before him, or any one else," Mr. Hill answered shortly. "I want to talk to you, and to you alone. I don't see what any one wants interfering between a man and his wife."

"You will see me," Anna remarked calmly, "under the present conditions, or not at all."

Mr. Hill set down his hat upon the table.

"Very well," he said. "I came here determined to keep my temper, and I will. I will say what I have to say before Mr. Brendon. If you don't mind, I don't see why I should."

"That is sensible," Anna said. "Won't you sit down?"

"No, thanks," Mr. Hill answered. "I'm more at my ease standing. First of all I want to finish what I began to say just before the accident."

Anna opened her mouth and shut it again.

"Go on," she said quietly.

"I know," he continued, "that I was guilty of a shabby action in letting you believe that I was Meysey Hill. It wasn't altogether my fault. I was led into it. I was mistaken for him so often that I got tired of correcting people. And then Mademoiselle Celeste found out, and she only laughed. She advised me to keep it up. She told me that it was my only chance of getting you to look at me. And you know how I was about you. Every one knew.

It was the sort of thing I'd heard of, but never understood. The thought of you was like a fever in my blood. I couldn't sleep or eat or rest for thinking about you. It's hard to talk about—and before him," he pointed to Brendon, " but as I was then so I am now. I know that I was a cad to let you marry me, believing I was Meysey Hill. I can't help it now. It's past and done with. What I want to say to you is this. We're man and wife, bound hard and fast. We can't get away from it. Won't you let bygones be bygones, and make the best of it ? I'm not a rich man. I'm traveller for a firm of brewers and wine merchants, but I don't do badly, and you could keep on your show at the music halls if you wanted to. I'd do anything for you in reason. I—I'm not a bad sort really, though that Meysey Hill business was shabby. Come, what do you say ? "

He was nervous. His twitching features showed it. There were drops of perspiration upon his forehead. His hand was extended half doubtfully. Anna did not take it, but there was something of pity as well as contempt in her steady regard of him.

" Is this all ? " she asked.

" All ! " he repeated vaguely.

" All that you want to say to me," she explained. " I should like to have this matter quite settled up, now that we are here face to face."

" It depends," he said, " upon your answer."

" Very well," Anna said. " Now my whole answer to you is exactly what it has always been. You seem to be sane. I can only conclude that you are the victim of some extraordinary hallucination.

I do not know you. I never even saw you in Paris. I never was married to you."

He drew a step nearer to her. She did not flinch.

"Say it again," he muttered. "Let me look at you while you say it."

"I never saw you in my life before that evening in Montague Street," she repeated calmly. "As to my having been married to you, the whole story is an absolute and absurd fabrication."

The man was shaking with nervous fury. Brendon came closer to him.

"Your name," he cried. "Do you deny that. You are Annabel Pellissier. I could bring a hundred to prove it."

"It is not necessary," she answered. "I do not deny it."

"You are 'Alcide.' You sang last night at the 'Universal' the same song that I have heard you sing at the 'Ambassadors.'"

"I was certainly singing last night at the 'Universal,'" Anna answered.

"You simply mock me, then," he cried. "It's a damned silly way to deal with a man. We know the truth, you as well as I. Yet you keep the bluff up, even when we are here alone. Is it because Brendon is here? If so, by God I'll throw him down the stairs."

Brendon was standing now by Anna's side. He was taller than Hill, but Hill was very powerfully built and he was beside himself with passion. The veins stood out on his forehead like purple cords. He spoke in little jerks.

"I came to talk the matter over—reasonably," he said. "I was willing to be fair and square about it. But I won't be bluffed to my face. I won't be

treated as though I were a fool or a madman. Once more, are you my wife or are you not ? "

" I am most certainly not your wife," she answered calmly. " As to your threats, well, I have had quite enough of them, and of you. I have given you an opportunity to speak, and you have spoken. So have I."

She rang the bell. Hill swayed upon his feet as though about to spring either at her or at Brendon, who was watching him closely. The maidservant appeared.

" The door, Mary, to this gentleman," Anna said.

There was a moment's dead silence. Then Hill took up his hat. He made a groping movement towards the door. He seemed crushed. The carnation in his coat seemed to have lost its vivid colour, his diamond pin to have gone dull. A curious negativeness seemed to have spread over the man and his glossy clothes, extending even to the utterly emotionless tone in which he spoke his last words to Anna.

" I came," he said, " prepared for peace. I would have listened to anything reasonable from you. You have chosen war. You think perhaps that this is the end. It is not even the beginning."

Brendon interposed, speaking for the first time since the man's entrance.

" One moment," he said. " Of the matter which lies between this lady and you, I know nothing. But whether your story is true or false you had better remember this. Miss Pellissier's friends will see that you are not allowed to annoy her. You can take this from me. If you make the slightest attempt to force your presence upon her I will thrash you

first, and have you up before the magistrates afterwards."

Hill listened to him patiently. When he had finished he left the room. They heard the street door close behind him. Brendon looked half fearfully towards Anna. She had drawn her chair up to the fire, and her fingers were busy with her hatpins.

"What an exhausting afternoon!" she exclaimed brightly. "Do ring the bell for tea, please. You can stop, if you like. I believe Mary has muffins."

"Thank you," he said, dropping into a chair.

"As to all that nonsense we have been listening to," she continued, folding up her veil upon her knee, "well, the man's mad. There's no more to be said about it."

"Just so," he repeated. "The man must be mad."

CHAPTER XXII

ANNABEL AND "ALCIDE"

LADY FERRINGHALL lifted her eyes to the newcomer, and the greeting in them was obviously meant for him alone. She continued to fan herself.

"You are late," she murmured.

"My chief," he said, "took it into his head to have an impromptu dinner-party. He brought home a few waverers to talk to them where they had no chance of getting away."

She nodded.

"I am bored," she said abruptly. "This is a very foolish sort of entertainment. And, as usual," she continued, a little bitterly, "I seem to have been sent along with the dullest and least edifying of Mrs. Montressor's guests."

Ennison glanced at the other people in the box and smiled.

"I got your note just in time," he remarked. "I knew of course that you were at the Montressor's, but I had no idea that it was a music hall party afterwards. Are you all here?"

"Five boxes full," she answered. "Some of them seem to be having an awfully good time too. Did you see Lord Delafield and Miss Anderson? They packed me in with Colonel Anson and Mrs. Hitchings,

who seem to be absolutely engrossed in one another, and a boy of about seventeen, who no sooner got here than he discovered that he wanted to see a man in the promenade and disappeared."

Ennison at once seated himself.

"I feel justified then," he said, "in annexing his chair. I expect you had been snubbing him terribly."

"Well, he was presumptuous," Annabel remarked, "and he wasn't nice about it. I wonder how it is," she added, "that boys always make love so impertinently."

Ennison laughed softly.

"I wonder," he said, "how you would like to be made love to—boldly or timorously or sentimentally."

"Are you master of all three methods?" she asked, stopping her fanning for a moment to look at him.

"Indeed, no," he answered, "Mine is a primitive and unstudied manner. It needs cultivating, I think."

His fingers touched hers for a moment under the ledge of the box.

"That sounds so uncouth," she murmured. "I detest amateurs."

"I will buy books and a lay figure," he declared, "to practise upon. Or shall I ask Colonel Anson for a few hints?"

"For Heaven's sake no," she declared. "I would rather put up with your own efforts, however clumsy. Love-making at first hand is dull enough. At second hand it would be unendurable."

He leaned towards her.

"Is that a challenge?"

She shrugged her shoulders, all ablaze with jewels. "Why not? It might amuse me."

Somewhat irrelevantly he glanced at the next few boxes where the rest of Mrs. Montressor's guests were.

"Is your husband here to-night?" he asked.

"My husband!" she laughed a little derisively. "No, he wouldn't come here of all places—just now. He dined, and then pleaded a political engagement. I was supposed to do the same, but I didn't."

"You know," he said with some hesitation, "that your sister is singing."

She nodded.

"Of course. I want to hear how she does it."

"She does it magnificently," he declared. "I think—we all think that she is wonderful."

She looked at him with curious eyes.

"I remember," she said, "that the first night I saw you, you spoke of my sister as your friend. Have you seen much of her lately?"

"Nothing at all," he answered.

The small grey feathers of her exquisitely shaped fan waved gently backwards and forwards. She was watching him intently.

"Do you know," she said, "that every one is remarking how ill you look. I too can see it. What has been the matter?"

"Toothache," he answered laconically.

She looked away.

"You might at least," she murmured, "have invented a more romantic reason."

"Oh, I might," he answered, "have gone further still. I might have told you the truth."

"Has my sister been unkind to you?"

"The family," he declared, "has not treated me with consideration."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"You promised faithfully to be there," he said slowly. "I loathe afternoon concerts, and——"

She was really like her sister, he thought, impressed for a moment by the soft brilliancy of her smile. Her fingers rested upon his.

"You were really at Moulton House," she exclaimed penitently. "I am so sorry. I had a perfect shoal of callers. People who would not go. I only arrived when everybody was coming away."

A little murmur of expectation, an audible silence announced the coming of "Alcide." Then a burst of applause. She was standing there, smiling at the audience as at her friends. From the first there had always been between her and her listeners that electrical sympathy which only a certain order of genius seems able to create. Then she sang.

Ennison listened, and his eyes glowed. Lady Ferringhall listened, and her cheeks grew pale. Her whole face stiffened with suppressed anger. She forgot Anna's sacrifices, forgot her own callousness, forgot the burden which she had fastened upon her sister's shoulders She was fiercely and bitterly jealous. Anna was singing as she used to sing. She was *chic*, distinguished, unusual. What right had she to call herself "Alcide"? It was abominable, an imposture. Ennison listened, and he forgot where he was. He forgot Annabel's idle attempts at love-making, all the *cul-de-sac* gallantry of the moment. The cultivated indifference which was part of the armour of his little world fell away from him. He leaned forward, and looked into the eyes of the woman he loved, and it seemed to him that

she sang back to him with a sudden note of something like passion breaking here and there through the gay mocking words which flowed with such effortless and seductive music from her lips.

Neither of them joined in the applause which followed upon her exit. They were both conscious, however, that something had intervened between them. Their conversation became stilted. A spot of colour, brighter than any rouge, burned on her cheeks.

"She is marvellously clever," he said.

"She appears to be very popular here," she remarked.

"You too sing?" he asked.

"I have given it up," she answered. "One genius in the family is enough. Don't you think so?"

"I suppose," he said, thoughtfully, "you heard what happened here the other night?"

"I read about it in the paper."

He fidgeted with his programme.

"The man must have been mad," he continued. "Declared he was her husband, you know, and wanted the magistrate to look at his marriage certificate."

"Do you mind," Annabel said, "talking about something else, or fetching back my recalcitrant cavalier."

"Anything except that," he murmured. "I was half hoping that I might be allowed to see you home."

"If you can tear yourself away from this delightful place in five minutes," she answered, "I think I can get rid of the others."

"We will do it," he declared. "If only Sir John

were not Sir John I would ask you to come and have some supper."

"Don't imperil my reputation before I am established," she answered, smiling. "Afterwards it seems to me that there are no limits to what one may not do amongst one's own set."

"I am frightened of Sir John," he said, "but I suggest that we risk it,"

"Don't tempt me," she said, laughing, and drawing her opera-cloak together. "You shall drive home with me in a hansom, if you will. That is quite as far as I mean to tempt Providence to-night."

* * * * *

Again on his way homeward from Cavendish Square he abandoned the direct route to pass by the door of Anna's flat. Impassive by nature and training, he was conscious to-night of a strange sense of excitement, of exhilaration tempered by a dull background of disappointment. Her sister had told him that it was true. Anna was married. After all, she was a consummate actress. Her recent attitude towards him was undoubtedly a pose. His long struggle with himself, his avoidance of her were quite unnecessary. There was no longer any risk in association with her. His pulses beat fast as he walked, his feet fell lightly upon the pavement. He slackened his pace as he reached the flat. The windows were still darkened—perhaps she was not homo yet. He lit a cigarette and loitered about. It was absurd to hope that he might see her to-night, yet it was pleasant to linger there, even though the night was sharp with an early frost, and to remember that at any moment he might see her. He laughed once or twice at himself as he paced backwards and forwards. He felt like a boy again, the taste for

fading smile passed from her lips. She had made her way since then a little further into the heart of life. Yet even now there were so many things untouched, so much to be learned. To-night she had a curious feeling that she stood upon the threshold of some change. The great untrodden world was before her still, into which no one can pass alone. She felt a new warmth in her blood, a strange sense of elation crept over her. Sorrows and danger and disappointment she had known. Perhaps the day of her recompense was at hand. She glanced into her companion's face, and she saw there strange things. For a moment her heart seemed to stop beating. Then she dropped the curtain and stepped back into the room, Sydney was strumming over a new song which stood upon the piano.

"I am sure," she said, "that you mean to stay until you are turned out. Do you see the time?"

"I may come and see you?" Ennison asked, as his hand touched hers.

"Yes," she answered, looking away. "Some afternoon."

CHAPTER XXIII

"THIS IS NOT THE END"

"I SAID some afternoon," she remarked, throwing open her warm coat, and taking off her gloves, "but I certainly did not mean to-day."

"I met you accidentally," he reminded her. "Our ways happened to lie together."

"And our destinations also, it seems," she added, smiling.

"You asked me in to tea," he protested.

"In self-defence I had to," she answered. "It is a delightful day for walking, but a great deal too cold to be standing on the pavement."

"Of course," he said, reaching out his hand tentatively for his hat, "I could go away even now. Your reputation for hospitality would remain under a cloud though, for tea was distinctly mentioned."

"Then you had better ring the bell," she declared, laughing. "The walk has given me an appetite, and I do not feel like waiting till five o'clock. I wonder why on earth the curtains are drawn. It is quite light yet, and I want to have one more look at that angry red sun. Would you mind drawing them back?"

Ennison sprang up, but he never reached the curtains. They were suddenly thrown aside, and a man stepped out from his hiding-place. A little

exclamation of surprise escaped Ennison. Anna sprang to her feet with a startled cry.

"You!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here? How dare you come to my rooms!"

The man stepped into the middle of the room. The last few months had not dealt kindly with Mr. Montague Hill. He was still flashily dressed, with much obvious jewellery and the shiniest of patent boots, but his general bearing and appearance had altered for the worse. His cheeks were puffy, and his eyes blood-shot. He had the appearance of a man who has known no rest for many nights. His voice when he spoke was almost fiercely assertive, but there was an undernote of nervousness.

"Why not?" he exclaimed. "I have the right to be here. I hid because there was no other way of seeing you. I did not reckon upon—him."

He pointed to Ennison, who in his turn looked across at Anna.

"You wish me to stay?" he asked, in a low tone.

"I would not have you go for anything," she answered.

"Nevertheless," Hill said doggedly, "I am here to speak to you alone."

"If you do not leave the room at once," Anna answered calmly, "I shall ring the bell for a policeman."

He raised his hand, and they saw that he was holding a small revolver.

"You need not be alarmed," he said. "I do not wish to use this. I came here peaceably, and I only ask for a few words with you. But I mean to have them. No, you don't!"

Ennison had moved stealthily a little nearer to

him, and looked suddenly into the dark muzzle of the revolver.

"If you interfere between us," the man said, "it will go hardly with you. This lady is my wife, and I have a right to be here. I have the right also to throw you out."

Ennison obeyed Anna's gesture, and was silent.

"You can say what you have to say before Mr. Ennison, if at all," Anna declared calmly. "In any case, I decline to see you alone."

"Very well," the man answered. "I have come to tell you this. You are my wife, and I am determined to claim you. We were properly married, and the certificate is at my lawyer's. I am not a madman, or a pauper, or even an unreasonable person. I know that you were disappointed because I did not turn out to be the millionaire. Perhaps I deceived you about it. However, that's over and done with. I'll make any reasonable arrangement you like. I don't want to stop your singing. You can live just about how you like. But you belong to me—and I want you."

He paused for a moment, and then suddenly continued. His voice had broken. He spoke in quick nervous sentences.

"You did your best to kill me," he said. "You might have given me a chance, anyway. I'm not such a bad sort. You know—I worship you. I have done from the first moment I saw you. I can't rest or work or settle down to anything while things are like this between you and me. I want you. I've got to have you, and by God I will."

He took a quick step forward. Anna held out her hand, and he paused. There was something

which chilled even him in the cold impassivity of her features.

"Listen," she said. "I have heard these things from you before, and you have had my answer. Understand once and for all that that answer is final. I do not admit the truth of a word which you have said. I will not be persecuted in this way by you."

"You do not deny that you are my wife," he asked hoarsely. "You cannot! Oh, you cannot."

"I have denied it," she answered. "Why will you not be sensible? Go back to your old life and your old friends, and forget all about Paris and this absurd delusion of yours."

"Delusion!" he muttered, glaring at her. "Delusion!"

"You can call it what you like," she said. "In any case you will never receive any different sort of answer from me. Stay where you are, Mr. Ennison."

With a swift movement she gained the bell and rang it. The man's hand flashed out, but immediately afterwards an oath and a cry of pain broke from his lips. The pistol fell to the floor. Ennison kicked it away with his foot.

"I shall send for a policeman," Anna said, "directly my maid answers the bell—unless you choose to go before."

The man made no attempt to recover the revolver. He walked unsteadily towards the door.

"Very well," he said, "I will go. But," and he faced them both with a still expressionless glance, "this is not the end!"

* * * * *

Anna recovered her spirits with marvellous

facility. It was Ennison who for the rest of his visit was quiet and subdued.

"You are absurd," she declared. "It was unpleasant while it lasted, but it is over—and my toasted scones are delicious. Do have another."

"It is over for now," he answered, "but I cannot bear to think that you are subject to this sort of thing."

She shrugged her shoulders slightly. Some of the delicate colour which the afternoon walk had brought into her cheeks had already returned.

"It is an annoyance, my friend," she said, "not a tragedy."

"It might become one," he answered. "The man is dangerous."

She looked thoughtfully into the fire.

"I am afraid," she said, "that he must have a skeleton key to these rooms. If so I shall have to leave."

"You cannot play at hide-and-seek with this creature all your life," he answered. "Let your friends act for you. There must be ways of getting rid of him."

"I am afraid," she murmured, "that it would be difficult. He really deserves a better fate, does he not? He is so beautifully persistent."

He drew a little nearer to her. The lamp was not yet lit, and in the dim light he bent forward as though trying to look into her averted face. He touched her hand, soft and cool to his fingers—she turned at once to look at him. Her eyes were perhaps a little brighter than usual, the firelight played about her hair, there seemed to him to be a sudden softening of the straight firm mouth. Nevertheless she withdrew her hand.

"Let me help you," be begged. "Indeed, you could have no more faithful friend, you could find no one more anxious to serve you."

Her hand fell back into her lap. He touched it again, and this time it was not withdrawn.

"That is very nice of you," she said. "But it is so difficult——"

"Not at all," he answered eagerly. "I wish you would come and see my lawyers. Of course I know nothing of what really did happen in Paris—if even you ever saw him there. You need not tell me, but a lawyer is different. His client's story is safe with him. He would advise you how to get rid of the fellow."

"I will think of it," she promised.

"You must do more than think of it," he urged. "It is intolerable that you should be followed about by such a creature. I am sure that he can be got rid of."

She turned and looked at him. Her face scarcely reflected his enthusiasm.

"It may be more difficult than you think," she said. "You see you do not know how much of truth there is in his story."

"If it were all true," he said doggedly, "it may still be possible."

"I will think of it," she repeated. "I cannot say more."

They talked for a while in somewhat dreamy fashion, Anna especially being more silent than usual. At last she glanced at a little clock in the corner of the room, and sprang to her feet.

"Heavens, look at the time!" she exclaimed. "It is incredible. I shall barely be in time for the theatre. I must go and dress at once."

He too rose.

"I will wait for you on the pavement, if you like," he said, "but I am going to the 'Universal' with you. Your maid would not be of the least protection."

"But your dinner!" she protested. "You will be so late."

He laughed.

"You cannot seriously believe," he said, "that at the present moment I care a snap of the fingers whether I have any dinner or not."

She laughed.

"Well, you certainly did very well at tea," she remarked. "If you really are going to wait, make yourself as comfortable as you can. There are cigarettes and magazines in the corner there."

Anna disappeared, but Ennison did not trouble either the cigarettes or the magazines. He sat back in an easy chair with a hand upon each of the elbows, and looked steadfastly into the fire.

People spoke of him everywhere as a young man of great promise, a politician by instinct, a keen and careful judge of character. Yet he was in a state of hopeless bewilderment. He was absolutely unable to focus his ideas. The girl who had just left the room was as great a mystery to him now as on the afternoon when he had met her in Piccadilly and taken her to tea. And behind—there was Paris, memories of amazing things, memories which made his cheeks burn and his heart beat quickly as he sat there waiting for her. For the first time a definite doubt possessed him. A woman cannot change her soul. Then it was the woman herself who was changed. Anna was not "Alcide" of the "Ambassador's," whose subtly demure smile and

piquant glances had called him to her side from the moment of their first meeting. It was impossible.

She came in while he was still in the throes, conviction battling with common-sense, his own apprehension. He rose at once to his feet and turned a white face upon her.

"I am going to break a covenant," he cried. "I cannot keep silence any longer."

"You are going to speak to me of things which happened before we met in London?" she asked quietly.

"Yes! I must! The thing is becoming a torture to me. I must!"

She threw open the door and pointed to it.

"My word holds," she said. "If you speak—farewell."

He stood quite silent for a moment, his eyes fixed upon her face. Something he saw there had a curious effect upon him. He was suddenly calm.

"I shall not speak," he said, "now or at any other time. Come!"

They went out together and he called a hansom. From the opposite corner under the trees a man with his hat slouched over his eyes stood and glowered at them.

CHAPTER XXIV

ANNA'S SURRENDER

"THIS is indeed a gala night," he said, raising his glass, and watching for a moment the golden bubbles. "Was is really only this afternoon that I met you in St. James' Park?"

She nodded, and made a careful selection from a dish of quails.

"It was just an hour before teatime," she remarked. "I have had nothing since, and it seems a very long time."

"An appetite like yours," he said resignedly, "is fatal to all sentiment."

"Not in the least," she assured him. "I find the two inseparable."

He sighed.

"I have noticed," he said, "that you seem to delight in taking a topsy-turvy view of life. It arises, I think, from an over developed sense of humour. You would find things to laugh at even in Artemus Ward."

"You do not understand me at all," she declared. "I think that you are very dense. Besides, your remark is not in the least complimentary. I have always understood that men avoid like the plague a woman with a sense of humour."

So they talked on whilst supper was served, fall-

ing easily into the spirit of the place, and yet both of them conscious of some new thing underlying the gaiety of their tongues and manner. Anna, in her strange striking way, was radiantly beautiful. Without a single ornament about her neck, or hair, wearing the plainest of black gowns, out of which her shoulders shone gleaming white, she was easily the most noticeable and the most distinguished-looking woman in the room. To-night there seemed to be a new brilliancy in her eyes, a deeper quality in her tone. She was herself conscious of a recklessness of spirits almost hysterical. Perhaps, after all, the others were right. Perhaps she had found this new thing in life, the thing wonderful. The terrors and anxieties of the last few months seemed to have fallen from her, to have passed away like an ugly dream, dismissed with a shudder even from the memory. An acute sense of living was in her veins, even the taste of her wine seemed magical. Ennison too, always handsome and *debonnair*, seemed transported out of his calm self. His tongue was more ready, his wit more keen than usual. He said daring things with a grace which made them irresistible, his eyes flashed back upon her some eloquent but silent appreciation of the change in her manner towards him.

And then there came for both of them at least a temporary awakening. It was he who saw them first coming down the room—Annabel in a wonderful white satin gown in front, and Sir John stiff, unbending, disapproving, bringing up the rear. He bent over to Anna at once.

"It is your sister and her husband," he said. "They are coming past our table."

Annabel saw Ennison first, and noticing his single

companion calmly ignored him. Then making a pretence of stooping to rearrange her flowing train, she glanced at Anna, and half stopped in her progress down the room. Sir John followed her gaze, and also saw them. His face clouded with anger.

It was after all a momentary affair. Annabel passed on with a strained nod to her sister, and Sir John's bow was a miracle of icy displeasure. They vanished through the doorway. Anna and her escort exchanged glances. Almost simultaneously they burst out laughing.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Limp," he answered. "As a matter of fact, I deserve to. I was engaged to dine with your sister and her husband, and I sent a wire."

"It was exceedingly wrong of you," Anna declared. "Before I came to England I was told that there were two things which an Englishman who was *comme-il-faut* never did. The first was to break a dinner engagement."

"And the second?"

"Make love to a single woman."

"Your knowledge of our ways," he murmured "is profound. Yet, I suppose that at the present moment I am the most envied man in the room."

Her eyes were lit with humour. To have spoken lightly on such a subject a few hours ago would have seemed incredible.

"But you do not know," she whispered, "whether I am a married woman or not. There is Mr. Montague Hill."

The lights were lowered, and an attentive waiter hovered round Anna's cloak. They left the room amongst the last, and Ennison had almost to elbow his way through a group of acquaintances who had

all some pretext for detaining him, to which he absolutely refused to listen. They entered a hansom and turned on to the Embankment. The two great hotels on their right were still ablaze with lights. On their left the river, with its gloomy pile of buildings on the opposite side, and a huge revolving advertisement throwing its strange reflection upon the black water. A fresh cool breeze blew in their faces. Anna leaned back with half closed eyes.

"Delicious!" she murmured.

His fingers closed upon her hand. She yielded it without protest, as though unconsciously. Not a word passed between them. It seemed to him that speech would be an anticlimax.

He paid the cab, and turned to follow her. She passed inside and upstairs without a word. In her little sitting-room she turned on the electric light and looked around half fearfully.

"Please search everywhere," she said. "I am going through the other rooms. I shall not let you go till I am quite sure."

"If he has a key," Ennison said, "how are you to be safe?"

"I had bolts fitted on the doors yesterday," she answered. "If he is not here now I can make myself safe."

It was certain that he was not there. Anna came back into the sitting-room with a little sigh of relief.

"Indeed," she said, "it was very fortunate that I should have met you this afternoon. Either Sydney or Mr. Brendon always comes home with me, and to-night both are away. Mary is very good, but she is too nervous to be the slightest protection."

"I am very glad," he answered, in a low tone. "It has been a delightful evening for me."

"And for me," Anna echoed.

A curious silence ensued. Anna was sitting before the fire a little distance from him—Ennison himself remained standing. Some shadow of reserve seemed to have crept up between them. She laughed nervously, but kept her eyes averted.

"It is strange that we should have met Annabel," she said. "I am afraid your broken dinner engagement will not be so easy to explain."

He was very indifferent. In fact he was thinking of other things.

"I am going," he said, "to be impertinent. I do not understand why you and your sister should not see more of one another. You must be lonely here with only a few men friends."

She shook her head.

"Loneliness," she said, "is a luxury which I never permit myself. Besides—there is Sir John."

"Sir John is an ass!" he declared.

"He is Annabel's husband," she reminded him.

"Annabel!" He looked at her thoughtfully. "It is rather odd," he said, "but I always thought that your name was Annabel and hers Anna."

"Many other people," she remarked, "have made the same mistake."

"Again," he said, "I am going to be impertinent. I never met your sister in Paris, but I heard about her more than once. She is not in the least like the descriptions of her."

"She has changed a good deal," Anna admitted.

"There is some mystery about you both," he exclaimed, with sudden earnestness. "No, don't interrupt me. Why may I not be your friend?

Somehow or other I feel that you have been driven into a false position. You represent to me an enigma, the solution of which has become the one desire of my life. I want to give you warning that I have set myself to solve it. To-morrow I am going to Paris."

She seemed unmoved, but she did not look at him.

"To Paris! But why? What do you hope to discover there?"

"I do not know," he answered, "but I am going to see David Courtlaw."

Then she looked up at him with frightened eyes.

"David Courtlaw!" she repeated. "What has he to do with it?"

"He was your sister's master—her friend. A few days ago I saw him leave your house. He was like a man beside himself. He began to tell me something—and stopped. I am going to ask him to finish it."

She rose up.

"I forbid it!" she said firmly.

They were standing face to face now upon the hearthrug. She was very pale, and there was a look of fear in her eyes.

"I will tell you as much as this," she continued. "There is a secret. I admit it. Set yourself to find it out, if you will—but if you do, never dare to call yourself my friend again."

"It is for your good—your good only I am thinking," he declared.

"Then let me be the judge of what is best," she answered.

He was silent. The tinkling bell of a passing hansom seemed to ring into the room with curious distinctness. He felt his heart beat faster and

faster—his self-restraint slipping away. After all, what did it matter?—it or anything else in the world? She was within reach of his arms, beautiful, compelling, herself as it seemed suddenly conscious of the light which was burning in his eyes. A quick flush stained her cheeks. She put out her hands to avoid his embrace.

"No!" she exclaimed. "You must not. It is impossible."

His arms were around her. He only laughed his defiance.

"I will make it possible," he cried. "I will make all things possible."

Anna was bewildered. She did not know herself. Only she was conscious of an unfamiliar and wonderful emotion. She gave her lips to his without resistance. All her protests seemed stifled before she could find words to utter them. With a little sigh of happiness she accepted this new thing.

CHAPTER XXV

HER SISTER'S SECRET

"I THINK," Lady Ferringhall said, "that you are talking very foolishly. I was quite as much annoyed as you were to see Mr. Ennison with my sister last night. But apart from that, you have no particular objection to him, I suppose?"

"The occurrence of last night is quite sufficient in itself," Sir John answered, "to make me wish to discontinue Mr. Ennison's acquaintance. I should think, Anna, that your own sense—er—of propriety would enable you to see this. It is not possible for us to be on friendly terms with a young man who has been seen in a public place, having supper alone with your sister after midnight. The fact itself is regrettable enough—regrettable, I fear, is quite an inadequate word. To receive him here afterwards would be most repugnant to me."

"He probably does not know of the relationship," Annabel remarked.

"I imagine," Sir John said, "that your sister would acquaint him with it. In any case, he is liable to discover it at any time. My own impression is that he already knows."

"Why do you think so?" she asked.

"I noticed him call her attention to us as we passed down the room," he answered. "Of course

he may merely have been telling her who we were, but I think it improbable."

"Apart from the fact of his acquaintance with Anna—Annabel," Lady Ferringhall said quickly, "may I ask if you have any other objection to Mr. Ennison?"

Sir John hesitated.

"To the young man himself," he answered, "no! I simply object to his calling here two or three times a week during my absence."

"How absurd!" Annabel declared. "How could he call except in your absence, as you are never at home in the afternoon. And if I cared to have him come every day, why shouldn't he? I find him very amusing and very useful as well. He brought his mother to call, and as you know the Countess goes scarcely anywhere. Hers is quite the most exclusive set in London."

"My feeling in the matter," Sir John said, "is as I have stated. Further, I do not care for you to accept social obligations from Mr. Ennison, or any other young man."

"You are jealous," she declared contemptuously.

"If I am," he answered, reddening, "you can scarcely assert that it is without a cause. You will forgive my remarking, Anna, that I consider there is a great change in your manner towards me and your general deportment since our marriage."

Annabel laughed gaily.

"My dear man," she exclaimed, "wasn't that a foregone conclusion?"

"You treat the matter lightly," he continued. "To me it seems serious enough. I have fulfilled my part of our marriage contract. Can you wonder that I expect you to fulfil yours?"

"I am not aware," she answered, "that I have ever failed in doing so."

"You are at least aware," he said, "that you have on several recent occasions acted in direct opposition to my wishes."

"For example?"

"Your dyed hair. I was perfectly satisfied with your appearance. I consider even now that the present colour is far less becoming. Then you have altered not only that, but your manner of dressing it. You have darkened your eyebrows, you have even changed your style of dress. You have shown an almost feverish anxiety to eliminate from your personal appearance all that reminded me of you—when we first met."

"Well," she said, "has there not been some reason for this? The likeness to Annabel could scarcely have escaped remark. You forget that every one is going to the 'Universal' to see her."

He frowned heavily.

"I wish that I could forget it," he said. "Fortunately I believe that the relationship is not generally known. I trust that no unpleasant rumours will be circulated before the election, at any rate."

Annabel yawned.

"They might do you good," she remarked. "'Alcide' is very popular."

Sir John turned towards the door.

"It does not appear to me," he said, stiffly, "to be an affair for jests."

Annabel laughed derisively and took up her book. She heard her husband's heavy tread descending the stairs, and the wheels of his carriage as he drove off. Then she threw the volume away with a little impatient exclamation. She rose from her chair, and

began walking up and down the room restlessly. Every now and then she fingered an ornament, moved a piece of furniture, or rearranged some draperies. Once she stopped in front of a mirror and looked at herself thoughtfully.

"I am getting plain," she said, with a little shudder. "This life is killing me! Oh, it is dull, dull, dull!"

Suddenly an idea seemed to strike her. She went to her room and changed the loose morning gown in which she had lunched for a dark walking dress. A few minutes later she left the house on foot, and taking a hansom at the corner of the Square, drove to Anna's flat.

Anna was having tea by herself when she entered. She rose at once with a little exclamation, half of surprise, half of pleasure.

"My dear Annabel," she said, "this is delightful, but I thought that it was forbidden."

"It is," Annabel answered shortly. "But I wanted to see you."

Anna wheeled an easy chair to the fire.

"You will have some tea?" she asked.

Annabel ignored both the chair and the invitation. She was looking about her, and her face was dark with anger. The little room was fragrant with flowers, Anna herself bright, and with all the evidences of well being. Annabel was conscious then of the slow anger which had been burning within her since the night of her visit to the "Universal." Her voice trembled with suppressed passion.

"I have come for an explanation," she said. "You are an impostor. How dare you use my name and sing my songs?"

Anna looked at her sister in blank amazement.

"Annabel!" she exclaimed. "Why, what is the matter with you? What do you mean?"

Annabel laughed scornfully.

"Oh, you know," she said. "Don't be a hypocrite. You are not 'Alcide.' You have no right to call yourself 'Alcide.' You used to declare that you hated the name. You used to beg me for hours at a time to give it all up, never to go near the 'Ambassador's' again. And yet the moment I am safely out of the way you are content to dress yourself in my rags, to go and get yourself popular and admired and successful, all on my reputation."

"Annabel! Annabel!"

Annabel stamped her foot. Her tone was hoarse with passion.

"Oh, you can act!" she cried. "You can look as innocent and shocked as you please. I want to know who sent you those."

She pointed with shaking finger to a great bunch of dark red carnations, thrust carelessly into a deep china bowl, to which the card was still attached. Anna followed her finger, and looked back into her sister's face.

"They were sent to me by Mr. Nigel Ennison, Annabel. How on earth does it concern you?"

Annabel laughed hardly.

"Concern me!" she repeated fiercely. "You are not content then with stealing from me my name. You would steal from me then the only man I ever cared a snap of the fingers about. They are not your flowers. They are mine! They were sent to 'Alcide' not to you."

Anna rose to her feet. At last she was roused. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes bright.

"Annabel," she said, "you are my sister, or I would bid you take the flowers if you care for them, and leave the room. But behind these things which you have said to me there must be others of which I know nothing. You speak as one injured—as though I had been the one to take your name—as though you had been the one to make sacrifices. In your heart you know very well that this is absurd. It is you who took my name, not I yours. It is I who took the burden of your misdeeds upon my shoulders that you might become Lady Ferringhall. It is I who am persecuted by the man who calls himself your husband,"

Annabel shivered a little and looked around her.

"He does not come here," she exclaimed, quickly.

"He spends hours of every day on the pavement below," Anna answered calmly. "He has attempted my life, I dare not even walk out alone. I have been bearing this—for your sake. Shall I send him to Sir John ?!"

Annabel was white to the lips, but her anger was not yet spent.

"It was your own fault," she exclaimed. "He would never have found you out if you had not personated me."

"On the contrary," Anna whispered quietly, "we met in a small boarding-house where I was stopping."

"You have not told me yet," Annabel said, "how it is that you have dared to personate me. To call yourself 'Alcide'! Your hair, your gestures, your voice, all mine! Oh, how dared you do it ?"

"You must not forget," Anna said calmly, "that

it is necessary for me also—to live. I arrived here with something less than five pounds in my pocket. My reception at West Kensington you know of. I was the black sheep, I was hurried out of the way. You did not complain then that I personated you—no, nor when Sir John came to me in Paris, and for your sake I lied."

"You did not——"

"Wait, Annabel! When I arrived in London I went to live in the cheapest place I could find. I set myself to find employment. I offered myself as a clerk, as a milliner, as a shop girl. I would even have taken a place as waitress in a tea shop. I walked London till the soles of my boots were worn through, and my toes were blistered. I ate only enough to keep body and soul together."

"There was no need for such heroism," Annabel said coldly. "You had only to ask——"

"Do you think," Anna interrupted, with a note of passion trembling also in her tone, "that I would have taken alms from Sir John, the man to whom I had lied for your sake. It was not possible. I went at last when I had barely a shilling in my purse to a dramatic agent. By chance I went to one who had known you in Paris."

"Well!"

"He greeted me effusively. He offered me at once an engagement. I told him that I was not 'Alcide.' He only laughed. He had seen the announcement of your marriage in the papers, and he imagined that I simply wanted to remain unknown because of your husband's puritanism. I sang to him, and he was satisfied. I did not appear, I have never announced myself as 'Alcide.' It was the Press who forced the identity upon me."

"They were my posters," Annabel said. "The ones Cariolus did for me."

"The posters at least," Anna answered quietly, "I have some claim to. You know very well that you took from my easel David Courtlaw's study of me, and sent it to Cariolus. You denied it at the time—but unfortunately I have proof. Mr. Courtlaw found the study in Cariolus' studio."

Annabel laughed hardly.

"What did it matter?" she cried. "We are, or rather we were, so much alike then that the portrait of either of us would have done for the other. It saved me the bother of being studied."

"It convinced Mr. Earles that I was 'Alcide,'" Anna remarked quietly.

"We will convince him now to the contrary," Annabel answered.

Anna looked at her, startled.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Annabel set her teeth hard, and turned fiercely towards Anna.

"It means that I have had enough of this slavery," she declared. "My husband and all his friends are fools, and the life they lead is impossible for me. It takes too many years to climb even a step in the social ladder. I've had enough of it. I want my freedom."

"You mean to say," Anna said slowly, "that you are going to leave your husband?"

"Yes."

"You are willing to give up your position, your beautiful houses, your carriages and milliner's accounts to come back to Bohemianism?"

"Why not?" Annabel declared. "I am sick of it. It is dull—deadly dull."

"And what about this man—Mr. Montague Hill?"

Annabel put her hand suddenly to her throat and steadied herself with the back of a chair. She looked stealthily at Anna.

"You have succeeded a little too well in your personation," she said bitterly, "to get rid very easily of Mr. Montague Hill. You are a great deal more like what I was a few months ago than I am now."

Anna laughed softly.

"You propose, then," she remarked, "that I shall still be saddled with a pseudo husband. I think not, Annabel. You are welcome to proclaim yourself 'Alcide' if you will. I would even make over my engagement to you, if Mr. Earles would permit. But I should certainly want to be rid of Mr. Montague Hill, and I do not think that under those circumstances I should be long about it."

Annabel sank suddenly into a chair. Her knees were trembling, her whole frame was shaken with sobs.

"Anna," she moaned, "I am a jealous, ungrateful woman. But oh, how weary I am! I know. If only—Anna, tell me," she broke off suddenly, "how did you get to know Mr. Ennison?"

"He spoke to me, thinking that I was you," Anna answered. "I liked him, and I never undeceived him."

"And he sat at my table," Annabel said bitterly, "and yet he did not know me."

Anna glanced up.

"You must remember," she said, "that you yourself are responsible for your altered looks."

"For the others," Annabel said tearfully. "that is well enough. But for him——"



"ANNABEL BENT OVER AND WHISPERED IN HER SISTER'S EAR."

Anna, the Adventuress] [*Page* 225.

Something in her sister's tone startled Anna. She looked at her for a moment fixedly. When she tried to speak she found it difficult. Her voice seemed to come from a long way off.

"What do you mean, Annabel? You only knew Mr. Ennison slightly——"

There was a dead silence in the little room. Anna sat with the face of a Sphinx—waiting. Annabel thought, and thought again.

"I knew Mr. Ennison better than I have ever told you," she said slowly.

"Go on!"

"You know—in Paris they coupled my name with some one's—an Englishman's. Nigel Ennison was he."

Anna stood up. Her cheeks were aflame. Her eyes were lit with smouldering passion.

"Go on!" she commanded. "Let me know the truth."

Annabel looked down. It was hard to meet that gaze.

"Does he never speak to you of—of old times?" she faltered.

"Don't fence with me," Anna cried fiercely. "The truth!"

Annabel bent over her and whispered in her sister's ear.

CHAPTER XXVI

AN OLD FOOL

LADY FERRINGHALL made room for him on the sofa by her side. She was wearing a becoming tea-gown, and it was quite certain that Sir John would not be home for several hours at least.

" I am delighted to see you, Mr. Ennison," she said, letting her fingers rest in his. " Do come and cheer me up. I am bored to distraction."

He took a seat by her side. He was looking pale and ill. There were shadows under his eyes. He returned her impressive greeting almost mechanically.

" But you yourself," she exclaimed, glancing into his face, " you too look tired. You poor man, what have you been doing to yourself ? "

" Nothing except travelling all night," he answered. " I am just back from Paris. I am bothered. I have come to you for sympathy, perhaps for help."

" You may be sure of the one," she murmured. " The other too if it is within my power."

" It is within yours—if anybody's," he answered. " It is about your sister, Lady Ferringhall."

Annabel gave a little gasp. The colour slowly left her cheeks, the lines of her mouth hard-

ened. The change in her face was not a pleasant one.

"About my sister," she repeated slowly.

Her tone should have warned him, but he was too much in earnest to regard it.

"Yes. You remember that you saw us at the Savoy a few evenings ago?"

"Yes."

"And you knew, of course, that we were old friends?"

"Indeed!"

"Lady Ferringhall, I love your sister."

"You what?" she repeated incredulously.

"I love your sister."

Lady Ferringhall sat with half closed eyes and clenched teeth. Brute! Fool! To have come to her on such a errand. She felt a hysterical desire to strike him, to burst out crying, to blurt out the whole miserable truth. The effort to maintain her self-control was almost superhuman.

"But—your people!" she gasped. "Surely Lady Ennison would object, even if it were possible. And the Duke, too—I heard him say that a married secretary would be worse than useless to him."

"The difficulties on my own side I can deal with," he answered. "I am not dependent upon any one. I have plenty of money, and the Duke will not be in the next Cabinet. My trouble is with your sister."

Lady Ferringhall was conscious of some relief.

"She has refused to listen to you?"

"She has behaved in a most extraordinary manner," he answered. "We parted—that night the best of friends. She knew that I cared for her, she had admitted that she cared for me. I

suppose I was a little idiotic—I don't think we either of us mentioned the future, but it was arranged that I should go the next afternoon and have tea with her. When I went I was refused admittance. I have since received a most extraordinary letter from her. She offers me no explanation, permits me absolutely no hope. She simply refuses to see or hear from me again. I went to the theatre that night. I waited for her at the back. She saw me, and, Lady Ferringhall, I shall never forget her look as long as I live. It was horrible. She looked at me as though I were some unclean thing, as though my soul were weighted with every sin in the calendar. I could not have spoken to her. It took my breath away. By the time I had recovered myself she had gone. My letters are returned unopened, her maid will not even allow me across the doorstep."

"The explanation seems to me to be reasonably simple," Annabel said coldly. "You seem to forget that my sister is—married."

"If she is," he answered, "I am convinced that there are circumstances in connexion with that marriage which would make a divorce easy."

"You would marry a divorcée?" she asked.

"I would marry your sister anyhow, under any circumstances," he answered.

She looked at him curiously.

"I want to ask you a question," she said abruptly. "This wonderful affection of yours for my sister, does it date from your first meeting with her in Paris?"

He hesitated.

"I admired your sister in Paris," he answered, "but I do not believe that I regard her now as altogether the same person. Something has

happened to change her marvellously, either that, or she wilfully deceived me and every one else in those days as to her real self. She was a much lighter and more frivolous person, very charming and companionable—but with a difference—a great difference. I wonder whether you would mind, Lady Ferringhall," he went on, with a sudden glance at her, "if I tell you that you yourself remind me a great deal more of what she was like then, except of course that your complexion and colouring are altogether different."

"I am highly flattered," she remarked, with subtle irony.

"Will you help me?" he asked.

"What can I do?"

"Go and see her. Find out what I have done or failed to do. Get me an interview with her."

"Really," she said, with a hard little laugh, "you must regard me as a very good-natured person."

"You are," he answered unconsciously. "I am sure that you are. I want her to tell me the whole truth about this extraordinary marriage. We will find some way out of it."

"You think that you can do that?"

"I am sure of it," he answered, confidently. "Those things are arranged more easily in any other country than England. At any rate she must see me. I demand it as a right. I must know what new thing has come between us that she should treat me as a lover one day and a monster the next."

She leaned back amongst the cushions of her chair. She was very pale, but she reminded him more at that minute than at any time of "Alcide" as he had first known her.

"I wonder," she said, "how much you care."

"I care as a man cares only once in his life," he answered promptly. "When it comes there is no mistaking it."

"Did it come—in Paris?"

"I do not know," he answered. "I do not think so. What does it matter? It is here, and it is here to stay. Do help me, Lady Ferringhall. You need not be afraid. No trouble will ever come to your sister through me. If this idiotic marriage is binding then I will be her friend. But I have powerful friends. I only want to know the truth, and I will move heaven and earth to have it set aside."

"The truth," she murmured, with her eyes fixed upon him. "Well——"

She stopped short. He looked at her in some embarrassment.

"Forgive me," he said, "but I want to hear it from your sister. It is her duty to tell me, and I would not have her think that I had been trying to work upon your sympathies to learn her secrets."

She was silent.

"You will go and see her," he begged.

"Yes, I will go," she promised, with a queer little smile. "It is against my husband's orders, and I am not sure that my sister will be particularly glad to see me. But I will go."

"I shall always be grateful to you," he declared.

"Don't be too sure of that," she answered enigmatically.

* * * * *

She looked at herself in the glass, long and earnestly.

"Blind fool!" she exclaimed under her breath. "Why cannot he guess the truth? I have done my

hair in the old way and left off the rouge. Yet he hasn't the faintest idea."

Sir John came in from a Board meeting, and she gave him some tea. It chanced that there were no other callers. He looked at her once or twice curiously.

"Is it my fancy, Anna?" he asked, "or have you done your hair differently?"

She laughed bitterly.

"It is pleasant to have some one to notice these things," she declared. "You were complaining the other day, were you not, that I had changed so much. For your private benefit, and for this afternoon only, I have reverted to the old style. I can't alter the colour, but you must take that for granted."

Sir John rose solemnly from his chair, and coming over to her side stooped and kissed her.

"It is an unusual compliment, my dear," he said. "I thank you."

She accepted his embrace passively. He returned to his seat.

"I hope," he said, "that you will not be dull this evening. This electioneering is becoming wearisome, but it is a necessity."

"Thank—you," she said. "I shall not mind a quiet evening at all. If I am dull I shall go round and see Sylvia Mannering."

"Be sure that you take a carriage and your maid," he said. "I wish that I could ask you to come with me. I am afraid however that it will be a rather rough meeting."

She yawned.

"I wish," she said, "that politics were not so deadly dull."

"I am sorry," he answered quietly, "that you find

them so. I trust however you will remember that I shall expect you to give me some of your time next week."

"What a bore!" she answered, abstractedly.

Sir John frowned. He looked across at his wife in stern disapproval.

"It seems to me, Anna," he said, "that lately you find most things a bore."

"I am afraid I do," she admitted.

Sir John leaned forward in his chair.

"It is an ungracious task," he said, "to refer to the change in your life which I have been able to bring about, but you force me to remind you of certain things. I found you in Paris absolutely poverty stricken, and in real or apparent distress concerning the misbehaviour of your sister. Forgive me, Anna, but I see no cause for mirth."

The smile faded from her lips.

"I agree with you," she said. "Go on."

"It suited you," he continued, "to make yourself a very charming companion to me. You were always bright and cheerful, and any little expedition which I planned you seemed to enter into and enjoy. I myself, I fear, am a somewhat dull person. For that reason perhaps you were more than ordinarily attractive to me. We were married, and you yourself shall be the judge whether you have not been since then a changed woman. You may say that I am a depressing person to live with. You see very little more of me now than during the few weeks before we were married, and you certainly did not appear to find me such then."

"Dear me," Annabel exclaimed. "This is a perfect indictment. You combat my excuses before I make them. I shall be crushed flat."

"I think you can scarcely fail to recognize the truth of what I say," Sir John declared. "You complained of our being able to get away for only a week, of my house at Hampstead, of my friends. I have let you choose your own residence, you are here to make such friends as your position entitles you to. I have not deceived you on one single point. On the contrary, I have done far more than I ever promised. Am I unreasonable therefore if I look to you for some better evidence—of your appreciation ?"

A spark of real sympathy—or perhaps it was remorse—touched Annabel. She rose to her feet, and bending lightly over his chair, kissed him on the lips.

"You poor old thing," she exclaimed. "I believe you're quite right. I'm not half so sweet as I ought to be,"

Sir John was gratified. He appeared ridiculously pleased. He retained hold of her fingers.

"That is very charming of you, dear," he said. "You know what I heard a man call me in the club the other day, when he heard that I had married some one so very much younger—an old fool—that was it. Lately I think the phrase has haunted me. There may be a little truth in it, Anna, but I don't want it thrust home too hard."

"How idiotic!" she laughed. "Between ourselves I think—yes, I think that you would have been an old fool if you hadn't married me."

Sir John smiled like a young man.

"I quite agree with you, my dear," he said.

CHAPTER XXVII

MONTAGUE HILL SEES LIGHT AT LAST

AT exactly ten minutes past ten Annabel rang the bell of her sister's flat. There was no response. She rang again with the same result. Then, as she was in the act of turning reluctantly away, she noticed a thin crack between the door and the frame. She pushed the former and it opened. The latch had not fully caught.

The flat was apparently empty. Annabel turned on the electric light and made her way into the sitting-room. There was a coffee equipage on the table, and some sandwiches, and the fire had been recently made up. Annabel seated herself in an easy chair and determined to wait for her sister's return.

The clock struck half-past ten. The loneliness of the place somewhat depressed her. She took up a book and threw it down again. Then she examined with curiosity some knick-knacks upon a small round table by her side. Amongst them was a revolver. She handled it half fearfully, and set it carefully down again. Then for the first time she was conscious of an unaccountable and terrifying sensation. She felt that she was not alone.

She was only a few yards from the door, but lacked the courage to rise and fly. Her knees shook, her breath came fast, she almost felt the lurid effect

of those tiny patches of rouge upon her pallor-stricken cheeks. Her eyes were dilated—fixed in a horrified stare at the parting in the curtains which hung before the window.

There was some one there. She had seen a man's head steal out for a moment and draw the curtains a little closer. Even now she could trace the outline of his shape behind the left-hand curtain. She was wholly unable to conceal her knowledge of his presence. A little smothered cry broke from her lips,—the curtains were thrown aside and a man stepped out. She was powerless to move from her chair. All through that brief but measureless space of time during which wonder kept him silent, as fear did her, she cowered there, a limp helpless object. Her courage and her presence of mind had alike deserted her. She could neither speak nor move nor cry out,

"Annabel! God in Heaven, it is Annabel!"

She did not speak. Her lips parted, but no words came.

"What have you done to yourself?" he muttered. "You have dyed your hair and darkened your eyebrows. But you are Annabel. I should know you—in Heaven or Hell. Who is the other?"

"What other?"

Her voice seemed to come from a long way off. Her lips were dry and cracked.

"The Annabel who lives here, who sings every night at the 'Universal'? They call her by your old name. Her hair and voice and figure are as yours used to be. Who is she, I say?"

"My sister!" Annabel faltered.

He trembled violently He seemed to be labouring under some great excitement.

"I am a fool," he said. "All these days I have taken her for you. I have pleaded with her—no wonder that I have pleaded with her in vain. And all this time perhaps you have been waiting, expecting to hear from me. Is it so, Annabel?"

"I did not know," she faltered, "anything about you. Why should I?"

"At last," he murmured, "at last I have found you. I must not let you go again. Do you know, Annabel, that you are my wife."

"No," she moaned, "not that. I thought—the papers said——"

"You thought that I was dead," he interrupted. "You pushed the wheel from my hand. You jumped, and I think that you left me. Yet you knew that I was not dead. You came to see me in the hospital. You must have repented a little, or you would not have done that."

"I did not come," she faltered. "It was my sister Anna. I had left Paris."

He passed his hand wearily over his forehead.

"That is where I got confused," he said. "I opened my eyes, and she was bending over my bedside. Then, I thought, she has repented, all will be well. So I made haste and recovered. I came to London to look for you, and somehow the figure I saw in my dreams had got mixed up with you. Your sister! Great God, how like she is to what you were!"

Annabel looked around her nervously.

"These are her rooms," she said. "Soon she will return."

"The sooner the better," he answered. "I must explain to her. Annabel, I cannot believe it. I have found you."

His eyes were burning. He advanced a step towards her. She held out both her hands.

"No, no," she cried. "You frighten me!"

He smiled at her indulgently.

"But I am your husband," he said. "You have forgotten. I am your husband, though as yet your hand has scarcely lain in mine."

"It was a mistake," she faltered. "You told me that your name was Meysey Hill. I thought that you were he."

His face darkened.

"I did it for love of you," he said. "I lied, as I would have committed a murder, or done any evil deed sooner than lose you. What does it matter? I am not a pauper, Annabel. I can keep you. You shall have a house out at Balham or Sydenham, and two servants. You shall have the spending of every penny of my money. Annabel, tell me that you did not wish me dead. Tell me that you are not sorry to see me again."

Her passion conquered for a moment her fear.

"But I am sorry," she exclaimed. "Our marriage must be annulled. It was no marriage at all."

"Never," he exclaimed vehemently. "You are mine, Annabel, and nothing shall ever make me give you up."

"But it is too late," she declared. "You have no right to hold me to a bargain which on your side was a lie. I consented to become Mrs. Meysey Hill—never your wife."

"What do you mean—by too late?" he demanded.

"There is some one else whom I care for!"

He laughed hardly.

"Tell me his name," he said, "and I promise that

he shall never trouble you. But you," he continued, moving imperceptibly a little nearer to her, "you are mine. The angels in Heaven shall not tear you from me. We leave this room together. I shall not part with you again."

"No," she cried, "I will not. I will have nothing to do with you. You are not my husband."

He came towards her with that in his face which filled her with blind terror.

"You belong to me," he said fiercely; "the marriage certificate is in my pocket. You belong to me, and I have waited long enough."

He stepped past her to the door and closed it. Then he turned with a fierce movement to take her into his arms. There was a flash and a loud report. He threw up his hand, reeled for a moment on his feet, and collapsed upon the floor.

"Annabel," he moaned. "You have killed me. My wife—killed me."

With a little crash the pistol fell from her shaking fingers. She stood looking down upon him with dilated eyes. Her faculties seemed for a moment numbed. She could not realize what she saw. Surely it was a dream. A moment before he had been a strong man, she had been in his power, a poor helpless thing. Now he lay there, a doubled-up mass, with ugly distorted features, and a dark wet stain dripping slowly on to the carpet. It could not be she who had done this. She had never let off a pistol in her life. Yet the smoke was curling upwards in a faint innocent-looking cloud to the ceiling. The smell of gunpowder was strong in the room.

It was true. She had killed him. It was as much accident as anything, but she had killed him.



"SHE DREW IT OUT WITH SHAKING FINGERS."

Once before—but that had been different. This time they would call it murder.

She listened, listened intently for several minutes. People were passing in the street below. She could hear their footsteps upon the pavement. A hansom stopped a little way off. She could hear the bell tinkle as the horse shook its head. There was no one stirring in the flats. He himself had deadened the sound by closing the door. She moved a little nearer to him.

It was horrible, but she must do it. She sank upon her knees and unbuttoned his coat. It was there in the breast pocket, stiff and legal looking. She drew it out with shaking fingers. There was a great splash of blood upon it, her hand was all wet and sticky. A deadly sickness came over her, the room seemed spinning round. She staggered to the fireplace and thrust it into the heart of the dying flames. She held it down with the poker, looking nervously over her shoulder. Then she put more coal on, piled it over the ashes, and stood once more upright.

Still silence everywhere. She pulled down her veil and made her way to the door. She turned out the electric light and gained the hall. Still no sound. Her knees almost sank beneath her as she raised the latch of the front door and looked out. There was no one to be seen. She passed down the stairs and into the street.

She walked for a mile or more recklessly, close veiled, with swift level footsteps, though her brain was in a whirl and a horrible faintness all the time hovered about her. Then she called a hansom and drove home.

    

"Miss Pellissier," he said gently, "I am afraid that some fresh trouble has come to you."

She smiled at him cheerfully.

"Am I dull?" she said. "I am sorry."

"You could never be that," he answered, "but you are at least more serious than usual."

"Perhaps," she said, "I am superstitious. This is my last week at the 'Universal,' you know. We begin rehearsing on Monday at the 'Garrick.'"

"Surely," he protested, "the change is all in favour of your own inclinations. It is your own choice, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"Yes. But I believe that Mr. Earles thinks I am a little mad, and between ourselves I am not sure about it myself. It is easy enough to sing these little chansons in an original way—it requires a very different sort of ability to succeed on the stage."

"You have it," he declared confidently.

She laughed altogether in her old manner.

"I wonder how it is," she exclaimed, "that my friends have so much more confidence in me than I have in myself."

"They know you better," he declared.

"I am afraid," she answered, "that one's friends can judge only of the externals, and the things which matter, the things inside are realized only by oneself—stop."

She laid her fingers upon his arm, and they both stood still. They had turned into the street, on the opposite side of which were the flats where Anna lived. Glancing idly up at her own window as they had swung round the corner she had seen a strange thing. The curtains which she had left drawn were open, and the electric lights were turned on. Then,

even as they stood there, the room was plunged into darkness.

"There is some one in my rooms," Anna said.

"Is it your maid?" he asked.

"I have given her two days' holiday," Anna answered. "She has gone down into the country."

"And no one else—has a key?"

"I believe," she said, "that that man must have one. I am safe while I am there, for I have had bolts fitted everywhere, and a pane of glass in the front door. But I am always afraid that he may get in while I am away. Look! Is that some one coming out?"

The front door of the flats stood open, and through it a woman, slim and veiled, passed on to the pavement and turned with swift footsteps in the opposite direction. Anna watched her with curious eyes.

"Is it any one you know?" Brendon asked.

"I am not sure," Anna answered. "But, of course, she may have come from one of the other flats."

"Perhaps," he said, "you had better let me have your key, and I will go up and explore."

"We will go together," she answered.

They crossed the street, and entering the front door passed up the outside stone steps of the flat. Anna herself opened the hall-door. They stood for a moment in the passage and listened. Silence! Then Anna clutched her companion's arm.

"What was that?" she asked sharply.

He had heard nothing. They both listened intently. Again silence.

"I thought that I heard a groan," Anna whispered.

He laughed reassuringly.

"I heard nothing," he declared, "and my ears are good. Come."

He threw open the door of the sitting-room and switched on the electric light.

"There is no—Good God!" he exclaimed.

He turned round to keep Anna out by force if possible, but he was too late. She was by his side. She too had seen. The thin stream of blood on which her eyes were fastened with a nameless horror reached almost to her feet.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A CASE FOR THE POLICE

AFTER that first horrible moment it was perhaps Anna who was the more self-possessed. She dropped on her knees by his side, and gently unbuttoned his waistcoat. Then she looked up at Brendon.

"You must fetch a doctor," she said. "I do not think that he is quite dead."

"And leave you here alone?" he asked, in a hoarse whisper. "Come with me."

"I am not afraid," she answered. "Please hurry."

He reeled out of the room. Anna was afterwards astonished at her own self-possession. She bound a scarf tightly round the place where the blood seemed to be coming from. Then she stood up and looked around the room.

There were no evidences of any struggle, no overturned chairs or disarranged furniture. The grate was full of the fluttering ashes of burnt paper, and the easy chair near the fire had evidently been used. On the floor was a handkerchief, a little morsel of lace. Anna saw it, and for the first time found herself trembling.

She moved towards it slowly and picked it up, holding it out in front of her whilst the familiar per-

fume seemed to assert itself with damning insistence. It was Annabel's. The lace was family lace, easily recognizable. The perfume was the only one she ever used. Annabel had been here then. It was she who had come out from the flat only a few minutes before. It was she——

Anna's nerves were not easily shaken, but she found herself suddenly clutching at the table for support. The room was reeling, or was it that she was going to faint ? She recovered herself with a supreme effort. There were the burnt papers still in the grate. She took up the poker and stirred the fire vigorously. Almost at the same moment the door opened and Brendon entered, followed by the doctor.

Anna turned round with a start, which was almost of guilt, the poker still in her hand. She met the keen grey eyes of a clean-shaven man, between forty and fifty, quietly dressed in professional attire. Before he even glanced at the man on the floor he stepped over to her side and took the poker from her.

"Forgive me, madam," he said stiffly, "but in such a case as this it is better that nothing in the room should be disturbed until the arrival of the police. You have been burning paper, I see."

"Are you a detective or a doctor ?" she asked calmly. "Do you need me to remind you that your patient is bleeding to death ?"

He dropped on his knees by the man's side and made a hurried examination.

"Who tied this scarf here ?" he asked, looking up.

"I did," Anna answered. "I hope that it has not done any harm."

"He would have been dead before now without

it," the doctor answered shortly. "Get me some brandy and my bag."

It was nearly half an hour before they dared ask him the question.

"Will he live?"

The doctor shook his head.

"It is very doubtful," he said. "You must send for the police at once, you know. You, sir," he added, turning to Brendon, "had better take my card round to the police station in Werner Street and ask that Detective Dorling be sent round here at once on urgent business."

"Is it necessary to send for the police?" Anna asked.

"Absolutely," the doctor answered, "and the sooner the better. This is a case either of suicide or murder. The police are concerned in it in either event."

"Please go then, Mr. Brendon," Anna said. "You will come back, won't you?"

He nodded cheerfully.

"Of course I will," he answered.

The doctor and Anna were left alone. Every moment or two he bent over his patient. He seemed to avoid meeting Anna's eyes as much as possible.

"Does he live here?" he asked her presently.

"No."

"Far away?"

"I have no idea," Anna answered.

"Who is the tenant of these rooms?" he inquired.

"I am."

"You will have no objection to his remaining here?" he asked. "A move of any sort would certainly be fatal."

"Of course not," Anna said. "Had he better have a nurse? I will be responsible for anything of that sort."

"If he lives through the next hour," the doctor answered, "I will send some one. Do you know anything of his friends? Is there any one for whom we ought to send?"

"I know very little of him beyond his name," Anna answered. "I know nothing whatever of his friends or his home. He used to live in a boarding-house in Russell Street. That is where I first knew him."

The doctor looked at her thoughtfully. Perhaps for the first time he realized that Anna was by no means an ordinary person. His patient was distinctly of a different order of life. It was possible that his first impressions had not been correct.

"Your name, I believe, is——"

"Pellissier," Anna answered.

"Allow me," the doctor said, "to give you a word of advice, Miss Pellissier. A detective will be here in a few moments to make inquiries into this affair. You may have something to conceal, you may not. Tell the whole truth. It always comes out sooner or later. Don't try to shield anybody or hide anything. It is bad policy."

Anna smiled very faintly.

"I thank you for your advice," she said. "I can assure you that it was quite unnecessary. I know less about this affair perhaps than you suppose. What I do know I shall have no hesitation in telling anyone who has the right to ask."

"Just so," the doctor remarked drily. "And if I were you I would keep away from the fire."

Brendon reappeared, followed by a tall thin man

with a stubbly brown moustache and restless grey eyes. The doctor nodded to him curtly.

"Good evening, Dorling," he said. "Before you do anything else I should advise you to secure those charred fragments of paper from the grate. I know nothing about this affair, but some one has been burning documents."

The detective went down on his hands and knees. With delicate touch he rescued all that was possible of them, and made a careful little parcel. Then he stepped briskly to his feet and bent over the wounded man.

"Shot through the lungs," he remarked.

The doctor nodded.

"Bad hemorrhage," he said. "I am going to fetch some things that will be wanted if he pulls through the next hour. I found him lying like this, the bleeding partly stopped by this scarf, else he had been dead by now."

The doctor glanced towards Anna. Considering his convictions he felt that his remark was a generous one. Anna's face however was wholly impassive.

He took up his hat and went. The detective rapidly sketched the appearance of the room in his note-book, and picked up the pistol from under the table. Then he turned to Anna.

"Can you give me any information as to this affair?" he asked.

"I will tell you all that I know," Anna said. "My name is Anna Pellissier, sometimes called Annabel. I am engaged to sing every evening at the 'Universal' music hall. This man's name is Montague Hill. I saw him first a few months ago at Mrs. White's boarding-house in Russell Street. He subjected me there to great annoyance by claiming me as his wife.

As a matter of fact, I had never spoken to him before in my life. Since then he has persistently annoyed me. A few nights ago he fired a pistol at me at the 'Universal,' and was bound over to keep the peace. Ever since then, however, I have seen him hanging about the place. I have suspected him of possessing a skeleton key to my apartments. To-night I locked up my flat at six o'clock. It was then, I am sure, empty. I dined with a friend and went to the 'Universal.' At a quarter past eleven I returned here with this gentleman, Mr. Brendon. As we turned the corner of the street, I noticed that the electric light was burning in this room. We stopped for a moment to watch it, and almost immediately it was turned out. We came on here at once. I found the door locked as usual, but when we entered this room everything was as you see. Nothing has been touched since."

The detective nodded.

"A very clear statement, madam," he said. "From what you saw from the opposite pavement then, it is certain that some person who was able to move about was in this room only a minute or so before you entered it?"

"That is so," Anna answered.

"You met no one upon the stairs, or saw no one leave the flats?"

"No one," Anna answered firmly.

"Then either this man shot himself or some one else shot him immediately before your arrival—or rather if it was not himself the person who did it was in the room, say two minutes, before you arrived."

"That is so," Anna admitted.

"I will not trouble you with any questions about the other occupants of the flats," Mr. Dorling said.

"I shall have to go through the building. You say that this gentleman was with you?"

"I was," Brendon answered, "most providentially."

"You did not notice anything which may have escaped this lady? You saw no one leave the flats?"

"No one," Brendon answered.

"You heard no pistol-shot?"

"None."

The detective turned again to Anna.

"You know of no one likely to have had a grudge against this man?" he asked.

"No."

"There is no one else who has a key to your rooms?"

"No one except my maid, who is away in Wiltshire."

"The inference is, then," the detective said smoothly, "that this man obtained admission to your rooms by means of a false key, that he burnt some papers here and shot himself within a few moments of your return. Either that or some other person also obtained admission here and shot him, and that person is either still upon the premises or escaped without your notice."

"I suppose," Anna said, "that those are reasonable deductions."

The detective thrust his notebook into his pocket.

"I brought a man with me who is posted outside," he remarked. "With your permission I should like to search the remainder of your rooms."

Anna showed him the way.

"Have either of you been out of this room since you discovered what had happened?" he asked.

"Mr. Brendon went for the doctor," Anna answered. "I have not left this apartment myself."

Nothing unusual was discovered in any other part of the flat. While they were still engaged in looking round the doctor returned with a nurse and assistant.

"With your permission," he said to Anna, "I shall arrange a bed for him where he is. There is scarcely one chance in a dozen of saving his life; there would be none at all if he were moved."

"You can make any arrangements you like," Anna declared. "I shall leave the flat to you and go to an hotel."

"You would perhaps be so good as to allow one of my men to accompany you and see you settled," Mr. Dorling said deferentially. "In the event of his death we should require you at once to attend at the inquest."

"I am going to pack my bag," Anna answered. "In five minutes I shall be ready."

Mr. Dorling drew the doctor on one side.

"What do you think?" he whispered.

"She shot him, of course," the doctor answered. "It is quite plain—motive and everything. One can picture the whole scene. The man is probably her husband, a disreputable lot, by the look of him. He finds his way in here and waits for her. She returns—with the other fellow. Of course there's a row—either she or the other fellow shoots him. You will see what those scraps of paper are which they probably took from him and burned."

"I have a very strong idea," the detective said slowly, "that it was a marriage certificate."

"If you can prove that," the doctor answered,

"it should hang her. You are not letting her go, are you?"

The detective smiled.

"There is not the slightest object in arresting her," he said, "unless she tries to leave London. We can do that at any moment, and if we leave her alone she is far more likely to give herself away. How about the man?"

"He will die," the doctor answered.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE STEEL EDGE OF THE TRUTH

THE manservant, with his plain black clothes and black tie, had entered the room with a deferential little gesture.

"You will pardon me, sir," he said in a subdued tone, "but I think that you have forgotten to look at your engagement book. There is Lady Arlingford's reception to-night, ten till twelve, and the Hatton House ball, marked with a cross, sir, important. I put your clothes out an hour ago."

Nigel Ennison looked up with a little start.

"All right, Dunster," he said. "I may go to Hatton House later, but you needn't wait. I can get into my clothes."

The man hesitated.

"Can I bring you anything, sir—a whisky and soda, or a liqueur? You'll excuse me, sir, but you haven't touched your coffee."

"Bring me a whisky and soda, and a box of cigarettes," Ennison answered, "and then leave me alone, there's a good fellow. I'm a little tired."

The man obeyed his orders noiselessly.

"I have put the onyx buttons in the single-breasted white waistcoat, sir," he remarked, before leaving the room. "I saw Mr. Hamilton to-day, outfitter, sir, at Poole's, and he advised me to put

the double-breasted ones away for the moment. I wish you good-night, sir."

Ennison roused himself with an effort, took a long drink from his whiskey and soda, and lit a cigarette.

"What a fool I am!" he muttered, standing up on the hearthrug, and leaning his elbows upon the broad mantelpiece. "And yet I wonder whether the world ever held such another enigma in her sex. Paris looms behind—a tragedy of strange recollections—here she emerges Phœnix-like, subtly developed, a flawless woman, beautiful, self-reliant, witty, a woman with the strange gift of making all others beside her seem plain or vulgar. And then—this sudden thrust. God only knows what I have done, or left undone. Something unpardonable is laid to my charge. Only last night she saw me, and there was horror in her eyes . . . I have written, called—of what avail is anything—against that look . . . What the devil is the matter, Dunster?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," the man answered, "there is a lady here to see you."

Ennison turned round sharply.

"A lady, Dunster. Who is it?"

The man came a little further into the room.

"Lady Ferringhall, sir."

"Lady Ferringhall — alone?" Ennison exclaimed.

"Quite alone, sir."

Ennison was dismayed.

"For Heaven's sake, Dunster, don't let her out of the carriage, or hansom, or whatever she came in. Say I'm out, away, anything!"

"I am sorry, sir," the man answered, "but she

to the English Embassy, and we went through some sort of a ceremony. I thought it would be magnificent to have a great house in Paris, and more money than any other woman. Afterwards we started for *déjeuner* in a motor. On the way he confessed. He was not Meysey Hill, but an Englishman of business, and he had only a small income. Every one took him for the millionaire, and he had lost his head about me. I—well, I lost my temper. I struck him across the face, twisted the steering wheel of the motor, sprang out myself, and left him for dead on the road with the motor on top of him. This is the first act."

"Served the beast right," Ennison declared. "I think I can tell you something which may be very good news for you presently. But go on."

"Act two," she continued. "Enter Sir John, very honest, very much in love with me. I thought that Hill was dead, but I was frightened, and I wanted to get away from Paris. Sir John heard gossip about us—about Anna the recluse, a paragon of virtue, and Annabel alias 'Alcide,' a dancer at the *cafés chantants*, and concerning whom there were many stories which were false, and a few—which were true. I—well, I borrowed Anna's name. I made her my unwilling confederate. Sir John followed me to London and married me. To this day he and every one else thinks that he married Anna.

"Act three. Anna comes to London. She is poor, and she will take nothing from my husband, the man she had deceived for my sake, and he, on his part, gravely disapproves of her as Alcide. She tries every way of earning a living and fails. Then she goes to a dramatic agent. Curiously enough

nothing will persuade him that she is not Alcide. He believes that she denies it simply because owing to my marriage with Sir John, whom they call the 'Puritan Knight,' she wants to keep her identity secret. He forces an engagement upon her. She nevercalls herself 'Alcide.' It is the Press who find her out. She is the image of what I was like, and she has a better voice. Then enter Mr. Hill again —alive. He meets Anna, and claims her as his wife. It is Anna again who stands between me and ruin."

"I cannot let you go on," Ennison interrupted. "I believe that I can give you great news. Tell me where the fellow Hill took you for this marriage ceremony."

"It was behind the Place de Vendome, on the other side from the Ritz."

"I knew it," Ennison exclaimed. "Cheer up, Annabel. You were never married at all. That place was closed by the police last month. It was a bogus affair altogether, kept by some blackguard or other of an Englishman. Everything was done in the most legal and imposing way, but the whole thing was a fraud."

"Then I was never married to him at all?" Annabel said.

"Never—but, by Jove, you had a narrow escape," Ennison exclaimed. "Annabel, I begin to see why you are here. Think! Had you not better hurry back before Sir John discovers? You are his wife right enough. You can tell me the rest another time."

She smiled faintly.

"The rest," she said, holding tightly to his hands, "is the most important of all. You came to me,

you wished me to speak to Anna. I went to her rooms to-night. There was no one at home, and I was coming away when I saw that the door was open. I decided to go in and wait. In her sitting-room I found Montague Hill. He had gained admission somehow, and he too was waiting for Anna. But—he was cleverer than any of you. He knew me, Nigel. 'At last,' he cried, 'I have found you!' He would listen to nothing. He swore that I was his wife, and—I shot him, Nigel, as his arms were closing around me. Shot him, do you hear?"

"Good God!" he exclaimed, looking at her curiously. "Is this true, Annabel? Is he dead?"

She nodded.

"I shot him. I saw the blood come as he rolled over. I tore the marriage certificate from his pocket and burnt it. And then I came here."

"You came—here!" he repeated, vaguely.

"Nigel, Nigel," she cried. "Don't you understand? It is I whom you cared for in Paris, not Anna. She is a stranger to you. You cannot care for her. Think of those days in Paris. Do you remember when we went right away, Nigel, and forgot everything? We went down the river past Veraz, and the larks were singing all over those deep brown fields, and the river further on wound its way like a coil of silver across the rich meadow-land, and along the hillside vineyards. Oh, the scent of the flowers that day, the delicious quiet, the swallows that dived before us in the river. Nigel! You have not forgotten. It was the first day you kissed me, under the willows, coming into Veraz. Nigel, you have not forgotten!"

"No," he said, with a little bitter smile. "I have never forgotten."



"'IF ONLY YOU WILL COME, I DO NOT CARE.'"

Anna the Adventuress.] [*Page* 259.

She suddenly caught hold of his shoulders and drew him down towards her.

"Nigel, don't you understand. I must leave England to-night. I must go somewhere into hiding, a long, long way off. I killed him, Nigel. They will say that it was murder. But if only you will come I do not care."

He shook her hands off almost roughly. He stood away from her. She listened with dumb fear in her eyes.

"Listen, Annabel," he said hoarsely. "We played at lovemaking in Paris. It was very pretty and very dainty while it lasted, but we played it with our eyes open, and we perfectly understood the game—both of us. Other things came. We went our ways. There was no broken faith—not even any question of anything of the sort. I met you here as Lady Ferringhall. We have played at a little mild lovemaking again. It has been only the sort of nonsense which passes lightly enough between half the men and women in London. You shall know the truth. I do not love you. I have never loved you. I call myself a man of the world, a man of many experiences, but I never knew what love meant—until I met your sister."

"You love—Anna ?" she exclaimed.

"I do," he answered. "I always shall. Now if you are ready to go with me, I too am ready. We will go to Ostend by the early morning boat and choose a hiding place from there. I will marry you when Sir John gets his divorce, and I will do all I can to keep you out of harm. But you had better know the truth to start with. I will do all this not because I love you, but—because you are Anna's sister."

Annabel rose to her feet.

"You are magnificent," she said, "but the steel of your truth is a little oversharpened. It cuts. Will you let your servant call me a hansom," she continued, opening the door before he could reach her side. "I had no idea that it was so abominably late."

He scarcely saw her face again. She pulled her veil down, and he knew that silence was best.

"Where to?" he asked, as the hansom drove up.

"Home, of course," she answered. "Eight, Cavendish Square."

CHAPTER XXX

ANNABEL IS WARNED

"YOU!"

He crossed the floor of the dingy little sitting-room with outstretched hands.

"You cannot say that you did not expect me," he answered. "I got Sydney's telegram at ten o'clock, and caught the ten-thirty from the Gare du Nord."

"It is very nice of you," she said softly.

"Rubbish!" he answered. "I could not have stayed in Paris and waited for news. Tell me exactly what has happened. Even now I do not understand. Is this man Hill dead?"

She shook her head.

"He was alive at four o'clock this afternoon," she answered, "but the doctors give little hope of his recovery."

"What is there to be feared?" he asked her quietly.

She hesitated

"You are my friend," she said, "if any one is. I think that I will tell you. The man Hill has persecuted me for months—ever since I have been in England. He claimed me for his wife, and showed to every one a marriage certificate. He

shot at me at the 'Universal,' and the magistrates bound him over to keep the peace. I found him once in my rooms, and I believe that he had a key to my front door. Last night Mr. Brendon and I returned from the 'Universal,' and found him lying in my room shot through the lungs. In the grate were some charred fragments of a marriage certificate. We fetched the doctor and the police. From the first I could see that neither believed my story. I am suspected of having shot the man."

"But that is ridiculous!" he exclaimed.

She laughed a little bitterly.

"I am under police surveillance," she said. "So is Mr. Brendon."

"But there is not a shadow of evidence against you," he objected. "The man alone could supply any, and if he recovers sufficiently to say anything, what he would say would exonerate you."

"Yes."

There was a moment's silence. Anna's face was half turned from him, but her expression, and the tone of her monosyllable puzzled him. He stepped quickly towards her. Her eyes seemed to be looking backwards. She distinctly shivered as he forced her to look at him. He was bewildered.

"Anna!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Look at me. What is it? Good God!"

An unhappy little smile parted her lips. She clenched her hands together and leaned forward in her chair, gazing steadily into the fire.

"I think," she said, "that I will tell you everything. I must tell somebody—and you would understand."

"I am your friend," he said slowly, "whatever

you may have to tell me. You can trust me, Anna. You know that. I will be as silent as the grave."

"Not long ago," she said, "you left me in anger, partly because of this exchange of identities between Annabel and myself. You said that it would bring trouble. It has."

"Yes."

"Annabel's real reason for wishing to leave Paris, the real reason she married Sir John Ferringhall, was because of a very foolish thing which she did. It was—in connection with this man Hill. He personated over there a millionaire named Meysey Hill, and it seems that he induced Annabel to go through some sort of marriage with him at the Embassy."

"Where?" Courtlaw asked quickly.

"In Paris."

Courtlaw seemed about to say something. He changed his mind however, and simply motioned to her to proceed.

"Then there was a motor accident only an hour or so after this ceremony, and Hill was reported to be killed. Annabel believed it, came to England and married Sir John. Now you can understand why I have been obliged to——"

"Yes, yes, I understand that," Courtlaw interrupted. "But about last night."

"Annabel knew where I lived," Anna continued slowly. "She has been to my flat before. I saw her come out from the flat buildings two minutes before we entered it last night. I picked up her handkerchief on the floor."

"You mean—you think——"

"Hush! I think that he was concealed in my

room, and Annabel and he met there. What passed between them I cannot think—I dare not. The pistol was his own, it is true, but it was one which was taken from him when he forced his way in upon me before. Now you can understand why every minute is a torture to me. It is not for myself I fear. But if he speaks—I fear what he may tell."

"You have been to her?" he asked.

"I dare not," she answered.

"I will go," he said. "She must be warned. She had better escape if she can."

Anna shook her head.

"She will take her risk" she answered. "I am sure of it. If he recovers he may not accuse her. If he dies she is safe."

He paced the room for a minute or two restlessly.

"There are some people," he said at last, "who seem fated to carry on their shoulders the burdens of other people. You, Anna, are one of them. I know in Paris you pinched and scraped that your sister might have the dresses and entertainments she desired. You fell in at once with her quixotic and damnable scheme of foisting her reputation and her follies upon your shoulders whilst she marries a rich man and commences all over again a life of selfish pleasure. You on the other hand have to come to London, a worker, with the responsibility of life upon your own shoulders—and in addition all the burden of her follies."

"You forget," she said, looking up at him with a faint smile, "that under the cloak of her name I am earning more money a week than I could ever have earned in a year by my own labours."

"It is an accident," he answered. "Besides, it is not so. You sing better than Annabel ever did, you have even abetter style. 'Alcide' or no 'Alcide,' there is not a music hall manager in London or Paris who would not give you an engagement on your own merits."

"Perhaps not," she answered. "And yet in a very few weeks I shall have done with it all. Do you think that I shall ever make an actress, my friend?"

"I doubt it," he answered bluntly. "You have not feeling enough."

She smiled at him.

"It is like old times," she said, "to hear these home truths. All the same, I don't admit it."

He shook his head.

"To be an actress," he said, "you require a special and peculiar temperament. I do not believe that there has ever lived a really great actress whose moral character from the ordinary point of view would bear inspection."

"Then I," she said, "have too much character."

"Too much character, and too little sentiment," he answered. "Too much sensibility and too cold a heart. Too easily roused emotions and too little passion. How could you draw the curtain aside which hides the great and holy places of life—you, who have never loved?"

"You have become French to the core," she murmured. "You would believe that life is kindled by the passions alone."

"I know," he answered, "that you who have never loved are like blindfold seekers after truth. You too will know it if the bandage is ever torn from before your eyes. You will see another world

than the world of everyday material things. You too will wander in the gardens which Keats loved, where Byron culled his violets, the garden beyond the mists."

"And are you sure," she said, half to herself, looking with sad eyes into the fire, "that I have never walked there?"

A new anxiety crept into his face. There were signs of it too in his tone as he leaned anxiously forward.

"A few months ago," he said, "I was very sure of it. To-day I cannot tell. There are new things written in your face, you have felt and suffered. You must tell me."

"My friend," she answered, "there is nothing to tell."

There was silence between them. Then a servant girl brought in a telegram. Anna tore it open and passed it to Courtlaw. It was from Brendon.

> "Hill gradually recovering consciousness. Doctor says depositions to-night. Recovery impossible.—BRENDON."

He looked at her gravely.

"I think," he said, "that some one ought to warn her."

"It is Number 8, Cavendish Square," she answered simply.

* * * * *

Courtlaw found himself ushered without questions into Annabel's long low drawing-room, fragrant with flowers and somewhat to his surprise, crowded with guests. From the further end of the apartment came the low music of a violin. Servants were passing backwards and forwards with tea and chocolate.

For a moment he did not recognize Annabel. Then she came a few steps to meet him.

"Mr. Courtlaw, is it not," she remarked, with lifted eyebrows. "Really it is very kind of you to have found me out."

He was bereft of words for a moment, and in that moment she escaped, having passed him on deftly to one of the later arrivals.

"Lady Mackinnor," she said, "I am sure that you must have heard of Mr. David Courtlaw. Permit me to make him known to you—Mr. Courtlaw—Lady Mackinnor."

With a murmured word of excuse she glided away, and Courtlaw, who had come with a mission which seemed to him to be one of life or death, was left to listen to the latest art jargon from Chelsea. He bore it as long as he could, watching all the time with fascinated eyes Annabel moving gracefully about amongst her guests, always gay, with a smile and a whisper for nearly everybody. Grudgingly he admired her. To him she had always appeared as a mere pleasure-loving parasite—something quite insignificant. He had pictured her, if indeed she had ever had the courage to do this thing, as sitting alone, convulsed with guilty fear, starting at her own shadow, a slave to constant terror. And instead he found her playing the great lady, and playing it well. She knew, or guessed his mission too, for more than once their eyes met, and she laughed mockingly at him. At last he could bear it no longer. He left his companion in the midst of a glowing eulogy of Bastien Leparge, and boldly intercepted his hostess as she moved from one group to join another.

"Can you spare me a moment?" he asked. "I have a message from your sister."

"Are you in a hurry," she asked carelessly. "A lot of these people will be going presently."

"My message is urgent," he said firmly. "If you cannot listen to me now it must remain undelivered."

She shrugged her shoulders and led him towards a small recess. "So you come from Anna, do you?" she remarked. "Well, what is it?"

"Montague Hill is recovering consciousness," he said. "He will probably make a statement to-night."

"That sounds very interesting," she answered coolly. "Perhaps I should better be able to understand its significance if you would explain to me who Mr. Montague Hill is."

"Your husband," he answered bluntly.

She did not wince. She laughed a little contemptuously.

"You and Anna," she said, "seem to have stumbled upon a mare's nest. If that is my sister's message, pray return to her and say that the doings and sayings of Mr. Montague Hill do not interest me in the least."

"Don't be foolish," he said sharply. "You were seen to leave the flat, and your handkerchief was found there. Very likely by this time the whole truth is known."

She smiled at him, an understanding smile, but her words defied him.

"What a beautiful mare's nest!" she exclaimed. "I can see you and Anna groaning and nodding your grave heads together. Bah! She does not know me very well, and you—not at all. Do have some tea, won't you? If you must, go then."

Courtlaw was dismissed. As he passed out he saw

in the hall a quietly dressed man with keen grey eyes, talking to one of the footmen. He shivered, and looked behind as he stepped into his hansom. Had it come already ?

CHAPTER XXXI

JOHN FERRINGHAM, GENTLEMAN

"CONFESS, my dear husband," Annabel said lightly, "that you are bewildered."

Sir John smiled.

"My dear Anna," he answered. "To tell you the truth, it has seemed just lately as though we were becoming in some measure estranged. You certainly have not shown much desire for my society, have you?"

"You have been wrapped up in your politics," she murmured.

He shook his head.

"There have been other times," he said a little sadly.

Her little white hand stole across the table. There was a look in her eyes which puzzled him.

"I have been very selfish," she declared. "But you must forgive me, John."

"I would forgive you a great deal more," he answered readily, "for the sake of an evening like this. You have actually given up a dinner-party to dine along with me."

"And made you give up a political meeting," she reminded him.

"Quite an unimportant one," he assured her. "I

would have given up anything to see you your old self again—as you are this evening."

"I am afraid I have not been very nice," she said sadly. "Never mind. You must think of this evening, John, sometimes—as a sort of atonement."

"I hope," he answered, looking at her in some surprise, "that we shall have many more such to think about."

They were lingering over their dessert. The servants had left the room. Annabel half filled her glass with wine, and taking a little folded packet from her plate, shook the contents into it.

"I am developing ailments," she said, meeting his questioning eyes. "It is nothing of any importance. John, I have something to say to you."

"If you want to ask a favour," he remarked smiling, "you have made it almost impossible for me to refuse you anything."

"I am going to ask more than a favour," she said slowly. "I am going to ask for your forgiveness."

He was a little uneasy.

"I do not know what you mean," he said, "but if you are referring to any little coolness since our marriage let us never speak of it again. I am something of an old fogey, Anna, I'm afraid, but if you treat me like this you will teach me to forget it."

Annabel looked intently into her glass.

"John," she said, "I am afraid that I am going to make you unhappy. I am very, very sorry, but you must listen to me."

He relapsed into a stony silence. A few feet away, across the low vases of pink and white roses, sat Annabel, more beautiful to-night perhaps than ever before in her life. She wore a wonderful dress of turquoise blue, made by a great dressmaker for a

function which she knew very well now that she would never attend. Her hair once more was arranged with its old simplicity. There was a new softness in her eyes, a hesitation, a timidity about her manner which was almost pathetic.

"You remember our first meeting?"

"Yes," he answered hoarsely. "I remember it very well indeed. You have the look in your eyes to-night which you had that day, the look of a frightened child."

She looked into her glass.

"I was frightened then," she declared. "I am frightened now. But it is all very different. There was hope for me then. Now there is none. No, none at all."

"You talk strangely, Anna," he said. "Go on!"

"People talked to you in Paris about us," she continued, "about Anna the virtuous and Annabel the rake. You were accused of having been seen with the latter. You denied it, remembering that I had called myself Anna. You went even to our rooms and saw my sister. Anna lied to you, I lied to you. I was Annabel the rake, 'Alcide' of the music halls. My name is Annabel, not Anna. Do you understand?"

"I do not," he answered. "How could I, when your sister sings now at the 'Universal' every night, and the name 'Alcide' flaunts from every placard in London?"

"The likeness between us," she said, "before I began to disfigure myself with rouge and ill-dressed hair, was remarkable. Anna failed in her painting, our money was gone, and she was forced to earn her own living. She came to London, and tried several things without any success."

"But why——"

Sir John stopped short. With a moment of inward shame he remembered his deportment towards Anna. It was scarcely likely that she would have accepted his aid. Some one had once, in his hearing, called him a prig. He remembered it suddenly. He thought of his severe attitude towards the girl who was rightly and with contempt refusing his measured help. He looked across at Annabel, and he groaned. This was his humiliation as well as hers.

"Anna of course would not accept any money from us," she continued, "She tried everything, and last of all she tried the stage. She went to a dramatic agent, and he turned out to be the one who had heard me sing in Paris. He refused to believe that Anna was not 'Alcide.' He thought she wished to conceal her identity because of the connexion with you, and he offered her an engagement at once. She was never announced as 'Alcide,' but directly she walked on she simply became 'Alcide' to every one. She had a better voice than I, and the rest I suppose is only a trick. The real 'Alcide'" she wound up with a faint smile across the table at him, "is here."

He sat like a man turned to stone. Some part of the stiff vigour of the man seemed to have subsided. He seemed to have shrunken in his seat. His eyes were fixed upon her face, but he opened his lips twice before he spoke.

"When you married me——"

Her little hand flashed out across the table.

"John," she said, "I can spare you that question. I had been about as foolish and selfish as a girl could be. I had done the most compromising things, and

behaved in the most ridiculous way. But from the rest—you saved me."

Sir John breathed a long deep sigh. He sat up in his chair again, the colour came back to his cheeks.

"John, don't!" she cried. "You think that this is all. You are going to be generous and forgive. It isn't all. There is worse to come. There is a tragedy to come."

"Out with it, then," he cried, almost roughly. "Don't you know, child, that this is torture for me? What in God's name more can you have to tell me?"

Her face had become almost like a marble image. She spoke with a certain odd deliberation carefully chosen words which fell like drops of ice upon the man who sat listening.

"Before I met you I was deluded into receiving upon friendly terms a man named Hill, who passed himself off as Meysey Hill the railway man, but who was in reality an Englishman in poor circumstances. He was going to settle I forget how many millions upon me, and I think that I was dazzled. I went with him to what I supposed to be the British Embassy, and went through a ceremony which I understood to be the usual form of the marriage one used there. Afterwards we started for a motor ride to a place outside Paris for *déjeuner*, and I suppose the man's nerve failed him. I questioned him too closely about his possessions, and remarked upon the fact that he was a most inexpert driver, although Meysey Hill had a great reputation as a motorist. Anyhow he confessed that he was a fraud. I struck him across the face, jumped out and went back by train to Paris. He lost control of the machine, was upset and nearly killed."

"Did you say," Sir John asked, "that the man's name was Hill?"

"Yes," she answered.

"The man who was found dead in your sister's room was named Hill?"

"It is the man," she answered. "I killed him."

Sir John clutched at the table with both hands. A slow horror was dawning in his fixed eyes. This was not the sort of confession which he had been expecting. Annabel had spoken calmly enough and steadily, but his brain refused at first to accept the full meaning of her words. It seemed to him that a sort of mist had risen up between them. Everything was blurred. Only her face was clear, frail and delicate, almost flower-like, with the sad haunting eyes ever watching his. Annabel a murderess! It was not possible.

"Child!" he cried. "You do not know what you say. This is part of a dream—some evil fancy. Think! You could not have done it."

She shook her head deliberately, hopelessly.

"I think that I know very well what I am saying," she answered. "I went to Anna's rooms because I felt that I must see her. He was there concealed, waiting for her return. He recognized me at once, and he behaved like a madman. He swore that I was his wife, that chance had given me to him at last. John, he was between me and the door. A strong coarse man, and there were things in his eyes which made my blood run cold with terror. He came over to me. I was helpless. Beside me on Anna's table was a pistol. I was not even sure whether it was loaded. I snatched it up, pointed it blindly at him, and fired."

"Ah!" Sir John exclaimed.

"He fell over at my feet," she continued. "I saw him stagger and sink down, and the pistol was smoking still in my hand. I bent over him. Anna had told me that he carried always with him this bogus marriage certificate. I undid his coat, and I took it from his pocket. I burned it."

"But the marriage itself?" Sir John asked. "I do not understand"

"There was no marriage," she answered. "I was very foolish to have been deceived even for a moment. There was no marriage, and I hated, oh, how I hated the man."

"Did any one see you leave the flat?" he asked.

"I do not know. But David Courtlaw has been here. To-night they say he will be conscious. He will say who it was. So there is no escape. And listen, John."

"Well?"

"I went from Anna's flat to Nigel Ennison's rooms. I told him the truth. I asked him to take me away, and hide me. He refused. He sent me home."

Sir John's head bent lower and lower. There was nothing left now of the self-assured, prosperous man of affairs. His shoulders were bent, his face was furrowed with wrinkles. He looked no longer at his wife. His eyes were fixed upon the tablecloth.

There was a gentle rustling of skirts. Softly she rose to her feet. He felt her warm breath upon his cheek, the perfume of her hair as she leaned over him. He did not look up, so he did not know that in her other hand she held a glass of wine.

"Dear husband," she murmured. "I am so very, very sorry. I have brought disgrace upon you, and I haven't been the right sort of wife at all. But it is all over now, and presently there will be some



"'GOOD-BYE, JOHN,' SHE SAID SIMPLY."

one else. I should like to have had you forgive me."

He did not move. He seemed to be thinking hard. She paused for a moment. Then she raised the glass nearer to her lips.

"Good-bye, John," she said simply.

Something in her tone made him look up. In a second the glass lay shattered upon the carpet. There was a stain of wine upon her dress.

"God in Heaven, Annabel!" he cried. "What were you doing?"

Her voice was a little hysterical. Her unnatural calm was giving way.

"It was poison—why not?" she answered. "Who is there to care and—John."

His arms were around her. He kissed her once on the lips with a passion of which, during all their days of married life, he had given no sign.

"You poor little girl!" he cried. "Forgive you, indeed. There isn't a husband breathing, Annabel, who wouldn't have blessed that pistol in your hands, and prayed God that the bullet might go straight. It is no crime, none at all. It is one of God's laws that a woman may defend her honour, even with the shedding of blood. While you talked I was only making our plans. It was necessary to think, and think quickly."

She was altogether hysterical now.

"But I—I went to Nigel Ennison for help. I asked him—to take me away."

She saw him flinch, but he gave no sign of it in his tone.

"Perhaps," he said, "I have been to blame. It must be my fault that you have not learnt that your husband is the man to come to—at such a time as

this. Oh, I think I understand, Annabel. You were afraid of me, afraid that I should have been shocked, afraid of the scandal. Bah. Little woman, you have been brave enough before. Pull yourself together now. Drink this!"

He poured out a glass of wine with a firm hand, and held it to her lips. She drank it obediently.

"Good," he said, as he watched the colour come back to her cheeks. "Now listen. You go to your room and ring for your maid. I received a telegram, as you know, during dinner. It contains news of the serious illness of a near relation at Paris. Your maid has twenty minutes to pack your dressing case for one night, and you have the same time to change into a travelling dress. In twenty minutes we meet in the hall, remember. I will tell you our plans on the way to the station."

"But you," she exclaimed, "you are not coming. There is the election——"

He laughed derisively.

"Election be hanged!" he exclaimed. "Don't be childish, Annabel. We are off for a second honeymoon. Just one thing more. We may be stopped. Don't look so frightened. You called yourself a murderess. You are nothing of the sort. What you did is called manslaughter, and at the worst there is only a very slight penalty, nothing to be frightened about in the least. Remember that."

She kissed him passionately, and ran lightly upstairs. In the hall below she could hear his firm voice giving quick commands to the servants.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE HISSING OF "ALCIDE"

THERE was a strange and ominous murmur of voices, a shuffling of feet in the gallery, a silence which was like the silence before a storm. Anna, who had sung the first verse of her song, looked around the house, a little surprised at the absence of the applause which had never yet failed her. She realized in a moment what had happened. Even though the individual faces of her audience were not to be singled out, she had been conscious from the first moment of her appearance that something was wrong. She hesitated, and for a moment thought of omitting her second verse altogether. The manager, however, who stood in the wings, nodded to her to proceed, and the orchestra commenced the first few bars of the music. Then the storm broke. A long shrill cat-call in the gallery seemed to be the signal. Then a roar of hisses. They came from every part, from the pit, the circle and the gallery, even from the stalls. And there arose too, a background of shouts.

"Who killed her husband?"

"Go and nurse him, missus!"

"Murderess!"

Anna looked from left to right. She was as pale as death, but she seemed to have lost the power

of movement. They shouted to her from the wings to come off. She could not stir hand or foot. A paralyzing horror was upon her. Her ear-drums were burning with the echoes of those hideous shouts. A crumpled-up newspaper thrown from the gallery hit her upon the cheek. The stage manager came out from the wings, and taking her hand led her off. There was more shouting.

The stage manager reappeared presently, and made a speech. He regretted—more deeply than he could say—the occurrence of this evening. He fancied that when they had had time to reflect, they would regret it still more. ("No, no.") They had shown themselves grossly ignorant of facts. They had chosen to deliberately and wickedly insult a lady who had done her best to entertain them for many weeks. He could not promise that she would ever appear again in that house. ("Good job.") Well, they might say that, but he knew very well that before long they would regret it. Of his own certain knowledge he could tell them that. For his own part he could not sufficiently admire the pluck of this lady, who, notwithstanding all that she had been through, had chosen to appear this evening rather than break her engagement. He should never sufficiently be able to regret the return which they had made to her. He begged their attention for the next turn.

He had spoken impressively, and most likely Anna, had she reappeared, would have met with a fair reception. She, however, had no idea of doing anything of the sort. She dressed rapidly and left the theatre without a word to any one. The whole incident was so unexpected that neither Courtlaw nor Brendon were waiting. The man who sat

behind a pigeon-hole, and regulated the comings and goings, was for a moment absent. Anna stood on the step and looked up and down the street for a hansom. Suddenly she felt her wrist grasped by a strong hand. It was Ennison, who loomed up through the shadows.

"Anna! Thank God I have found you at last. But you have not finished surely. Your second turn is not over, is it?"

She laughed a little hardly. Even now she was dazed. The horror of those few minutes was still with her.

"Have you not heard?" she said. "For me there is no second turn. I have said good-bye to it all. They hissed me!"

"Beasts!" he muttered. "But was it wise to sing to-night?"

"Why not? The man was nothing to me."

"You have not seen the evening papers?"

"No. What about them?"

He called a hansom.

"They are full of the usual foolish stories. To-morrow they will all be contradicted. To-night all London believes that he was your husband."

"That is why they hissed me, then?"

"Of course. To-morrow they will know the truth."

She shivered.

"Is this hansom for me?" she said. "Thank you—and good-bye."

"I am coming with you," he said firmly.

She shook her head.

"Don't!" she begged.

"You are in trouble," he said. "No one has a better right than I to be with you."

"You have no right at all," she answered coldly.

"I have the right of the man who loves you," he declared. "Some day you will be my wife, and it would not be well for either of us to remember that in these unhappy days you and I were separated."

Anna gave her address to the driver. She leaned back in the cab with half-closed eyes.

"This is all madness," she declared wearily. "Do you think it is fair of you to persecute me just now?"

"It is not persecution, Anna," he answered gently. "Only you are the woman I love, and you are in trouble. And you are something of a heroine, too. You see, my riddle is solved. I know all."

"You know all?"

"Your sister has told me."

"You have seen her—since last night?"

"Yes."

Anna shivered a little. She asked no further questions for the moment. Ennison himself, with the recollection of Annabel's visit still fresh in his mind, was for a moment constrained and ill at ease. When they reached her rooms she stepped lightly out upon the pavement.

"Now you must go," she said firmly. "I have had a trying evening and I need rest.",

"You need help and sympathy more, Anna," he pleaded, "and I have the right, yes I have the right to offer you both. I will not be sent away."

"It is my wish to be alone," she said wearily. "I can say no more."

She turned and fitted the latchkey into the door.

He hesitated for a moment and then he followed her. She turned the gas up in her little sitting-room, and sank wearily into an easy-chair. On the mantelpiece in front of her was a note addressed to her in Annabel's handwriting. She looked at it with a little shudder, but she made no motion to take it."

"Will you say what you have to say, please, and go. I am tired, and I want to be alone."

He came and stood on the hearthrug close to her.

"Anna," he said, "you make it all indescribably hard for me. Will you not remember what has passed between us? I have the right to take my place by your side."

"You have no right at all," she answered. "Further than that, I am amazed that you should dare to allude to those few moments, to that single moment of folly. If ever I could bring myself to ask you any favour, I would ask you to forget even as I have forgotten."

"Why in Heaven's name should I forget?" he cried. "I love you, Anna, and I want you for my wife. There is nothing but your pride which stands between us."

"There is a great deal more," she answered coldly. "For one thing I am going to marry David Courtlaw."

He stepped back as though he had received a blow.

"It is not possible." he exclaimed.

"Why not?"

"Because you are mine. You have told me that you cared. Oh, you cannot escape from it. Anna, my love, you cannot have forgotten so soon."

He fancied that she was yielding, but her eyes

fell once more upon that fatal envelope, and her tone when she spoke was colder than ever.

"That was a moment of madness," she said. "I was lonely. I did not know what I was saying."

"I will have your reason for this," he said. "I will have your true reason."

She looked at him for a moment with fire in her eyes.

"You need a reason. Ask your own conscience. What sort of a standard of life yours may be I do not know, yet in your heart you know very well that every word you have spoken to me has been a veiled insult, every time you have come into my presence has been an outrage. That is what stands between us, if you would know—that."

She pointed to the envelope still resting upon the mantelpiece. He recognized the handwriting, and turned a shade paler. Her eyes noted it mercilessly.

"But your sister," he said. "What has she told you?"

"Everything."

He was a little bewildered.

"But," he said, "you do not blame me altogether?"

She rose to her feet.

"I am tired," she said, "and I want to rest. But if you do not leave this room I must."

He took up his hat.

"Very well," he said. "You are unjust and quixotic, Anna, you have no right to treat any one as you are treating me. And yet—I love you. When you send for me I shall come back. I do not believe that you will marry David Courtlaw. I do not think that you will dare to marry anybody else."

He left the room, and she stood motionless, with flaming cheeks, listening to his retreating footsteps. When she was quite sure that he was gone she took her sister's note from the table and slowly broke the seal.

DEAREST A—

I lied to you. Nigel Ennison was my very good friend, but there is not the slightest reason for your not marrying him, if you wish to do so.

My husband knows all. We leave England to-night.

Ever yours,

ANNABEL.

Anna moved softly to the window, and threw up the sash. Ennison had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXXIII

MONTAGUE HILL PLAYS THE GAME

THE man opened his eyes and looked curiously about him.

"Where am I ?" he muttered.

Courtlaw, who was sitting by the bedside, bent over him.

"You are in a private room of St. Felix Hospital," he said.

"Hospital ? What for ? What's the matter with me ?"

Courtlaw's voice sank to a whisper. A nurse was at the other end of the room.

"There was an accident with a pistol in Miss Pellissier's room," he said.

The light of memory flashed in the man's face. His brows drew a little nearer together.

"Accident ! She shot me," he muttered. "I had found her at last, and she shot me. Listen, you. Am I going to die ?"

"I am afraid that you are in a dangerous state," Courtlaw answered gravely. "The nurse will fetch the doctor directly. I wanted to speak to you first."

"Who are you ?"

"I am a friend of Miss Pellissier's," Courtlaw answered.

"Which one ?"

" The Miss Pellissier in whose rooms you were, and who sings at the 'Universal,'" Courtlaw answered. " The Miss Pellisier who was at White's with us."

The man nodded.

" I remember you now," he said. " So it seems that I was wrong. Annabel was in hiding all the time."

" Annabel Pellissier is married," Courtlaw said quietly.

" She's my wife," the man muttered.

" It is possible," Courtlaw said, " that you too were deceived. Where were you married ? "

" At the English Embassy in Paris. You will find the certificate in my pocket."

" And who made the arrangements for you, and sent you there ? " Courtlaw asked.

" Hainault, Celeste's friend. He did everything."

" I thought so," Courtlaw said. " You too were deceived. The place to which you went was not the English Embassy, and the whole performance was a fraud. I heard rumours of it in Paris, and the place since then has been closed."

" But Hainault—assured—me—that the marriage was binding."

" So it would have been at the English Embassy," Courtlaw answered, " but the place to which you went was not the English Embassy. It was rigged up for the occasion as it has been many a time before."

" But Hainault—was—a pal. I—I don't understand," the man faltered wearily.

" Hainault was Celeste's friend, and Celeste was Annabel's enemy," Courtlaw said. " It was a plot amongst them all to humiliate her."

"Then she has never been my wife."

"Never for a second. She is the wife now of another man."

Hill closed his eyes. For fully five minutes he lay quite motionless. Then he opened them again suddenly, to find Courtlaw still by his side.

"It was a bad day for me," he said, speaking slowly and painfully. "A bad thing for me when that legacy came. I thought I'd see Paris, do the thing—like a toff. And I heard 'Alcide' sing, and that little dance she did. I was in the front row, and I fancied she smiled at me. Lord, what a state I was in! Night after night I sat there, I watched her come in, I watched her go. She dropped a flower—it's in my pocket-book now. I couldn't rest or eat or sleep. I made Hainault's acquaintance, stood him drinks, lent him money. He shook his head all the time. Annabel Pellissier was not like the others, he said. She had a few acquaintances, English gentlemen, but she lived with her sister—was a lady. But one day he came to me. It was Celeste's idea. I could be presented as Meysey Hill. We were alike. He was—a millionaire. And I passed myself off as Meysey Hill, and since—then—I haven't had a minute's peace. God help me."

Courtlaw was alarmed at the man's pallor.

"You mustn't talk any more," he said, "but I want you to listen to me just for a moment. The doctor will be here to see you in five minutes. The nurse sent for him as soon as she saw that you were conscious. It is very possible that he will ask you to tell him before witnesses how you received your wound."

The man smiled at him.

"You are their friend, then?"

" I am," Courtlaw answered.

" Which one ? "

" The one whose life you have been making a burden, who has been all the time shielding her sister. I would have married her long ago, but she will not have me."

" Bring her—here," Hill muttered. " I—"

The door opened, and the doctor entered softly. Hill closed his eyes. Courtlaw stood up.

" He has asked to see some one," he whispered to the doctor. " Is there any urgency ? "

The doctor bent over his patient, who seemed to have fallen asleep. Presently he turned to Courtlaw.

" I think," he said, " that I would fetch any one whom he has asked to see. His condition is not unfavourable, but there may be a relapse at any moment."

So only a few minutes after Ennison's departure, while Anna stood indeed with her sister's open letter still in her hand, Courtlaw drove up in hot haste. She opened the door to him herself.

" Will you come round to the hospital ? " he asked. " Hill has asked for you, and they will take his depositions to-night."

She slipped on her cloak and stepped into the hansom with him. They drove rapidly through the emptying streets.

" Will he die ? " she asked.

" Impossible to say," he answered. " We have a private room at St. Felix. Everything is being done that can be."

" You are sure that he asked for me—not for Annabel ? "

" Certain," Courtlaw answered.

"Has he accused any one yet?"

"Not yet," he answered. "I have scarcely left his side."

He was still conscious when they reached the hospital. On the whole his state was more favourable. The doctor and another man were by his bedside when they entered the room, and there were writing materials which had evidently been used close at hand. He recognised Anna, and at once addressed her.

"Thank you—for coming," he said. "The doctor has asked me to give them my reasons—for shooting myself. I've told them all that was necessary, but I—wanted to ask your pardon—for having made myself a nuisance to you, and for breaking into your rooms—and to thank you—the doctor says you bound up my wound—or I should have bled to death."

"I forgive you willingly," Anna said, bending over him. "It has all been a mistake, hasn't it?"

"No more talking," the doctor interposed.

"I want two words—with Miss Pellissier alone," Hill pleaded.

The doctor frowned.

"Remember," he said, "you are not by any means a dying man now, but you'll never pull through if you don't husband your strength."

"Two words only," Hill repeated.

They all left the room. Anna leaned over so that he needed only to whisper.

"Tell your sister she was right to shoot, quite right. I meant mischief. But tell her this, too. I believed that our marriage was genuine. I believed that she was my wife, or she would have been safe from me."

"I will tell her," Anna promised.

"She has nothing to be afraid of," he continued. "I have signed a statement that I shot myself; bad trade and drink, both true—both true."

His eyes were closed. Anna left the room on tiptoe. She and Courtlaw drove homewards together.

"The doctor thinks," he said, "that he has a very fair chance. In any case, you and Annabel are safe."

"Thanks in some measure to you, dear friend," she said gratefully.

He looked at her intently.

"I hate that word," he said. "It sounds almost as though I were foredoomed. May I ask you something, Anna?"

"If you wish to," she answered. "If you think it wise."

"Wisdom and folly," he said bitterly, "are beside the mark sometimes. In Paris, when I asked you to be my wife, you refused, because you told me that you meant to find your way a little further into the heart of life alone, you feared the limitations of marriage. Ah, Anna, you were too independent for a woman with a heart."

"You too," she answered, "are the same. Marriage would be your ruin. You would be an adorable lover but a shocking husband."

"I think," he said sadly, "that you do not mean to give me the opportunity of proving you a lying prophet. In Paris you were at least heart-whole."

"You do not venture to assert that I am anything else now," she exclaimed.

"I do not know. You are changed. You look like a woman who has suffered, but who has looked for

a little while into the World Beautiful. No one is ever quite the same afterwards."

"It may be," she answered softly, "that you are right."

They passed Annabel's great house in Cavendish Square, and Courtlaw stopped the cab.

"There are lights in the house still," he said. "Don't you think we ought to let your sister know."

They both climbed the steps, and Courtlaw rang the bell. The door was opened after a few minutes' delay.

"Has Lady Ferringhall retired yet?" Anna asked. "I am her sister, and I have an important message for her."

"I am very sorry, madam," the man answered, "but Sir John and her ladyship left for the Continent to-night. Her ladyship, I believe, received news of the serious illness of a relation."

Anna and Courtlaw exchanged quick glances.

"Did Sir John accompany Lady Ferringhall?" Anna asked.

"Certainly, madam," the man answered. "I packed his bag myself."

"Did they leave any address?"

"None beyond the Credit Lyonnais, madam."

Anna thanked the servant, and they re-entered the cab.

"I am very glad," she said "After all, Sir John must be a good sort, for Annabel has told him everything He has taken her away."

"We can wire in the morning," Courtlaw said, "or will they read it in the papers? Anna, is this to be good-bye?"

She gave him her hand, and the rare tears stood in her eyes.

" May a woman have no friends, then ? " she exclaimed almost passionately. " Must I lose half the good in life because I cannot split up my heart into little pieces ? "

" A woman who has a lover," he answered," finds her friends only an embarrassment."

" That," she declared, " is the most *banal* thing I have ever heard you say, and I think the most brutal. Besides, I have no lover yet. I don't want to look at the world and all that is in it through one man's eyes. If I may not have my friends I will never have my lover."

He helped her to alight, and his fingers closed upon hers warmly.

" The same Anna," he remarked, smiling at her. " Well, count me always first amongst the former."

" If you mean it," she said, smiling, " you will take me out to lunch to-morrow and bring Sydney. I haven't seen him for a week."

" Prince's at one-thirty," he answered, with mock resignation. " We will celebrate the new bond."

CHAPTER XXXIV

SIR JOHN'S NECKTIE

SIR JOHN, in a quiet dark travelling suit, was sitting in a pokey little room writing letters. The room was worse than pokey, it was shabby; and the view from the window of chimney pots and slate roofs wholly uninspiring. Nevertheless, Sir John had the look of a man who was enjoying himself. He seemed years younger, and the arrangement of his tie and hair were almost rakish. He stamped his last letter as Annabel entered.

She was dressed for the street very much as her own maid was accustomed to dress, and there was a thick veil attached to her hat.

"John," she declared, "I must eat or die. Do get your hat, and we will go to that corner café."

"Right," he answered. "I know the place you mean—very good cooking for such an out-of-the-way show. I'll be ready in a moment."

Sir John stamped his letters, brushed his hat, and carefully gave his moustache an upward curl before the looking-glass.

"I really do not believe," he announced with satisfaction, "that any one would recognize me. What do you think, Annabel?"

"I don't think they would," she admitted. "You seem to have cultivated quite a jaunty ap-

pearance, and you certainly look years younger. One would think that you enjoyed crawling away out of your world into hiding, with a very foolish wicked wife."

"Upon my word," he declared, "you are right. I really am enjoying it. It is like a second honeymoon. If it wasn't for the fear that after all—but we won't think of that. I don't believe any one could have traced us here. You see, we travelled second class, and we are in the least known quarter of Paris. To-night we leave for Marseilles. On Thursday we embark for South America."

"You are a marvellous courier," she declared, as they passed into the street. "You see, I will take your arm. It looks so French to be affectionate."

"There are some French customs," he declared, "which are admirable. I presume that I may not kiss you in the street ?"

"Certainly not, sir," she replied, laughing. "If you attempted such a thing it would be in order that I should smack you hard with the palm of my hand upon the cheek."

"That is another French custom," he remarked, "which is not so agreeable. Here we are. Shall we sit outside and drink a *petit verre* of something to give us an appetite while dinner is being prepared ?"

"Certainly not," she answered. "I am already so hungry that I shall begin on the *petit pains*. I have an appetite which I dare not increase."

They entered the place, a pleasant little café of the sort to be met with in the outlying parts of Paris. Most of the tables were for those who smoked only and drank wine, but there were a few spread with tablecloths and laid for dinner. Sir John and Annabel seated themselves at one of them, and the

proprietor himself, a small dark-visaged man, radiant with smiles, came hurrying up, followed by a waiter.

"Monsieur would dine! It was very good! And Madame, of course?" with a low bow. "The *carte de jour* was before Monsieur. He had but to give his orders. Monsieur could rely upon his special attention, and for the cooking—well, he had his customers, who came from their homes to him year after year. And always they were well satisfied. He waited the pleasure of Monsieur."

Sir John gave his order, deliberately stumbling now and then over a word, and anglicizing others. When he had finished he took up the wine list and ordered a bottle of dry champagne.

"I am afraid," he said to Anna afterwards, "that it was a mistake to order the champagne sec. They will guess that I am English."

Annabel leaned back in her chair and laughed till the tears stood in her eyes.

"Did you—did you really think that they would take you for a Frenchman?" she exclaimed.

"I don't see why not," he answered. "These clothes are French, and I'm sure this floppy bow would make a Frenchman of me anyhow. Perhaps I ought to have let you order the dinner, but I think I got through it pretty well."

"You did," Anna exclaimed. "Thank Heaven, they are bringing the *hors d'oeuvres*. John, I shall eat that whole tin of sardines. Do take them away from me after I have had four."

"After all," Sir John remarked complacently, "it is astonishing how easy it is for people with brains and a little knowledge of the world to completely hide themselves. I am absolutely certain

that up to the present we have escaped all notice, and I do not believe that any casual observer would take us for English people."

A man who had been sitting with his hat tilted over his eyes at an adjacent table had risen to his feet and stood suddenly before them.

"Permit me to offer you the English paper which has just arrived, Sir John," he said, holding out a *Daily Telegraph*. "You may find in it a paragraph of some interest to you."

Sir John was speechless. It was Annabel who caught at the paper.

"You—appear to know my name, sir," Sir John said.

"Oh yes," the stranger remarked good-humouredly. "I know you very well by sight, Sir John. It is my business to know most people. We were fellow passengers from Charing Cross, and we have been fellow lodgers in the Rue d'Entrepot. I trust you will not accuse me of discourtesy if I express my pleasure that henceforth our ways will lie apart."

A little sobbing cry from Annabel arrested Sir John's attention. The stranger with a bow returned to his table.

"Read this, John."

"THE BUCKNALL MANSIONS MYSTERY.

"Montague Hill, the man who was found lying wounded in Bucknall Mansions late on Wednesday night in the rooms of a well-known artiste, has recovered sufficiently to make a statement to the police. It appears that he was an unsuccessful admirer of the lady in question, upon whom, it will be remembered, he committed an assault recently at the Universal Music Hall. He admits that, under

the influence of drink, he broke into her rooms, and there made a determined attempt at suicide. He further gave the name and address of the firm from whom he purchased the revolver and cartridges, a member of which firm has since corroborated his statement.

"Hill's confession will finally refute a number of absurd stories which have been in circulation during the last few days. We understand that, notwithstanding the serious nature of the man's injuries, there is every possibility of his recovery."

Annabel pulled down her veil to hide the tears. Sir John filled his glass with trembling hand.

"Thank God," he exclaimed. "The fellow is not such a blackguard, after all."

Annabel's hand stole into his.

"And I have dragged you all over here for nothing," she murmured.

"For nothing, do you call it?" he declared. "I wouldn't have been without this trip for worlds. It has been a real honeymoon trip, Annabel, for I feel that it has given me a wife."

Annabel pulled up her veil.

"You are a dear," she exclaimed affectionately. "I do hope that I shall be able to make it up to you."

Sir John's reply was incoherent. He called a waiter.

"Garçon," he said, "will you ask the gentleman at the next table if he will do me the honour of taking a glass of wine with me."

The stranger came over to them smiling. He had been on the point of leaving the restaurant. He accepted the glass of wine, and bowed.



"'IF I MIGHT TAKE THE LIBERTY, SIR JOHN,' HE ADDED, 'I SHOULD LIKE TO CONGRATULATE YOU ON YOUR TIE.'"

Anna, the Adventuress.] [*Page* 299

"I drink your very good health, Sir John and Lady Ferringhall," he said, "and I wish you a pleasant journey back to England. If I might take the liberty, Sir John," he added, with a humorous gleam in his eyes, "I should like to congratulate you upon your tie."

"Oh, damn the thing!" Sir John exclaimed, tucking the loose ends inside his coat.

* * * * *

"I propose," Sir John said, "that we pay for our dinner—which we haven't had—tip the garçon a sovereign, and take a cab to the Ritz."

Annabel shook her head.

"Look at our clothes," she exclaimed, "and besides, the funny little proprietor has gone down himself to help it along. He would be so disappointed. I am sure it will be good, John, and I could eat anything. No, let us dine here, and then go and have our coffee on the boulevards. We can take our things up with us and stay at the Continental or the Ritz."

"Excellent," Sir John declared. "We will do Paris like the tourists, and thank God here comes dinner."

Everything was good. The garçon was tipped as he had never been tipped before in his life. They drove up into Paris in an open *fiacre* with a soft cool wind blowing in their faces, hand in hand beneath the rug. They went first to an hotel, and then out again on to the boulevards. The natural gaiety of the place seemed to have affected them both. They laughed and talked and stared about them. She took his hand in hers.

"Dear John," she whispered. "We are to begin our married life to-night—here where I first met you.

I shall only pray that I may reward you for all your goodness to me."

Sir John, frankly oblivious of the possibility of passers-by, took her into his arms and kissed her. Then he stood up and hailed a *fiacre.*

"Hotel Ritz!"

CHAPTER XXXV

ANNA'S TEA PARTY

"I SUPPOSE you haven't the least idea who I am," Lady Lescelles said, as she settled herself in Anna's most comfortable chair.

"I have heard of you, of course," Anna answered hesitatingly, "but——"

"You cannot imagine what I have come to see you about. Well, I am Nigel Ennison's sister!"

"Oh!" Anna said,

"Nigel is like all men," Lady Lescelles continued. "He is a sad blunderer. He has helped me out of scrapes though, no end of times. He is an awfully good sort—and now he has come to me to help him if I can. Do you know that he is very much in love with you?"

Anna smiled.

"Well," she admitted. "He has said something of the sort."

"And you have sent him about his business. He tells me that you will not even see him. I don't want to bother you, of course. A woman has a perfect right to choose her own husband, but Nigel seemed to think that there was something a little mysterious about your treatment of him. You seemed, he thought, to have some grievance which you would not explain and which he thought must

arise from a misunderstanding. There, that sounds frightfully involved, doesn't it, but perhaps you can make out what I mean. Don't you care for Nigel at all?"

Anna was silent for a moment or two.

Lady Lescelles, graceful, very fashionably but quietly dressed, leaned back and watched her with shrewd kindly eyes.

"I like your brother better than any other man I know," Anna said at last.

"Well, I don't think you told him as much as that, did you?" Lady Lescelles asked.

"I did not," Anna answered. "To be frank with you, Lady Lescelles, when your brother asked me the other day to be his wife I was under a false impression as regards his relations—with some other person. I know now that I was mistaken."

"That sounds more promising," Lady Lescelles declared. "May I tell Nigel to come and see you again? I am not here to do his love-making for him, you know. I came to see you on my own account."

"Thank you very much," Anna said. "It is very nice of you to come, but I do not think for the present, at any rate, I could give him any other answer. I do not intend to be married, or to become engaged just at present."

"Well, why not?" Lady Lescelles asked, smiling. "I can only be a few years older than you, and I have been married four years. I can assure you, I wouldn't be single again for worlds. One gets a lot more fun married."

"Our cases are scarcely similar," Anna remarked.

"Why not?" Lady Lescelles answered. "You

are one of the Hampshire Pellissiers, I know, and your family are quite as good as ours. As for money, Nigel has tons of it."

"It isn't exactly that," Anna answered, "but to tell you the truth, I cannot bear to look upon myself as a rank failure. We girls, my sister and I, were left quite alone when our father died, and I made up my mind to make some little place in the world for myself. I tried painting and couldn't get on. Then I came to London and tried almost everything—all failures. I had two offers of marriage from men I liked very much indeed, but it never occurred to me to listen to either of them. You see I am rather obstinate. At last I tried a dramatic agent, and got on the music hall stage."

"Well, you can't say you're a failure there," Lady Lescelles remarked, smiling. "I've been to hear you lots of times."

"I have been more fortunate than I deserved," Anna answered, "but I only meant to stay upon the music hall stage until I could get something better. I am rehearsing now for a new play at the 'Garrick' and I have quite made up my mind to try and make some sort of position for myself as an actress."

"Do you think it is really worth while?" Lady Lescelles asked gently. "I am sure you will marry Nigel sooner or later, and then all your work will be thrown away."

Anna shook her head.

"If I were to marry now," she said, "it would be with a sense of humiliation. I should feel that I had been obliged to find some one else to fight my battles for me."

"What else?" Lady Lescelles murmured, "are men for?"

Anna laughed.

"Afterwards," she said, "I should be perfectly content to have everything done for me. But I do think that if a girl is to feel comfortable about it they should start fairly equal. Take your case, for instance. You brought your husband a large fortune, your people were well known in society, your family interest I have heard was useful to him in his parliamentary career. So far as I am concerned, I am just now a hopeless nonentity. Your brother has everything—I have not shown myself capable even of earning my own living except in a way which could not possibly bring any credit upon anybody. And beyond this, Lady Lescelles, as you must know, recent events have set a good many peoples' tongues wagging, and I am quite determined to live down all this scandal before I think of marrying any one."

"I am sure," Lady Lescelles said, gently, "that the last consideration need not weigh with you in the least. No one in the world is beyond the shaft of scandal—we all catch it terribly sometimes. It simply doesn't count."

"You are very kind," Anna said. "I do hope I have been able to make you understand how I feel, that you don't consider me a hopeless prig. It does sound a little horrid to talk so much about oneself and to have views."

"I think," Lady Lescelles said, putting down her teacup, "that I must send Nigel to plead his own cause. I may tell him, at any rate, that you will see him?"

"I shall like to see him," Anna answered. "I really owe him something of an apology."

"I will tell him," Lady Lescelles said. "And now let us leave the men alone and talk about ourselves."

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"I am delighted to see you all here," Anna said smiling upon them from behind the tea-tray, "but I shall have to ask you to excuse me for a few minutes. My agent is here, and he has brought his contract for me to sign. I will give you all some tea, and then I must leave you for a few minutes."

The three men, who had arrived within a minute or two of one another, received her little speech in dead silence. Ennison, who had been standing with his back to the window, came suddenly a little further into the room.

"Miss Pellissier," he said, "I came here this afternoon hoping particularly to see you for a few moments before you signed that contract."

She shook her head.

"We may just as well have our talk afterwards," she said, "and I need not keep poor Mr. Earles waiting."

Courtlaw suddenly interposed.

"May I be allowed to say," he declared, "that I came here with the same intention."

"And I also," Brendon echoed.

Anna was suddenly very quiet.

She was perhaps as near tears as ever before in her life.

"If I had three hands," she said, with a faint smile, "I would give one to each of you. I know that you are all my friends, and I know that you

all have very good advice to give me. But I am afraid I am a shockingly obstinate and a very ungrateful person. No, don't let me call myself that. I am grateful, indeed I am. But on this matter my mind is quite made up."

Ennison hesitated for a moment.

"Miss Pellissier," he said, "these gentlemen are your friends, and therefore they are my friends. If I am to have no other opportunity I will speak before them. I came here to beg you not to sign that contract. I came to beg you instead to do me the honour of becoming my wife."

"And I," Courtlaw said, "although I have asked before in vain, have come to ask you once more the same thing."

"And I," Brendon said, humbly, "although I am afraid there is no chance for me, my errand was the same."

Anna looked at them for a moment with a pitiful attempt at a smile. Then her head disappeared suddenly in her hands, and her shoulders shook violently.

"Please forgive me—for one moment," she sobbed. "I—I shall be all right directly."

Brendon rushed to the piano and strummed out a tune.

The others hurried to the window. And Anna was conscious of a few moments of exquisite emotion. After all, life had still its pulsations. The joy of being loved thrilled her as nothing before had ever done, a curious abstract joy which had nothing in it at that moment of regret or even pity.

She called them back very soon.

The signs of tears had all gone, but some subtle change seemed to have to have stolen into her face.

She spoke readily enough, but there was a new timidity in her manner.

"My friends," she said, "my dear friends, I am going to make the same answer to all of you—and that is perhaps you will say no answer at all. At present I cannot marry, I will not become bound even to any one. It would be very hard perhaps to make you understand just how I feel about it. I won't try. Only I feel that you all want to make life too easy for me, and I am determined to fight my own battles a little longer. If any of you—or all of you feel the same in six months' time from to-day, will you come, if you care to, and see me then?"

There was a brief silence. Ennison spoke at last.

"You will sign the contract?"

"I shall sign the contract. I think that I am very fortunate to have it to sign."

"Do you mean," Courtlaw asked, "that from now to the end of the six months you do not wish to see us—any of us?"

Her eyes were a little dim again.

"I do mean that," she declared. "I want to have no distractions. My work will be all sufficient. I have an aunt who is coming to live with me, and I do not intend to receive any visitors at all. It will be a little lonely sometimes," she said, looking around at them, "and I shall miss you all, but it is the fairest for myself—and I think for you. Do not avoid me if we meet by accident, but I trust to you all not to let the accident happen if you can help it."

Brendon rose and came towards her with outstretched hand.

"Good-bye, Miss Pellissier, and success to you,"

he said. "May you have as much good fortune as you deserve, but not enough to make you forget us."

Courtlaw rose too.

"You are of the genus obstinate," he said. "I do not know whether to wish you success or not. I will wish you success or failure, whichever is the better for you."

"And I," Ennison said, holding her fingers tightly, and forcing her to look into his eyes, "I will tell you what I have wished for you when we meet six months from to-day."

CHAPTER XXXVI

SIX MONTHS AFTER

UP the moss-grown path, where the rose bushes run wild, almost met, came Anna in a spotless white gown, with the flush of her early morning walk in her cheeks, and something of the brightness of it in her eyes. In one hand she carried a long-stalked red rose, dripping with dew, in the other the post bag,

She reached a tiny yellow-fronted cottage covered with flowering creepers, and entered the front room by the wide-open window. Breakfast was laid for one, a dish of fruit and a shining coffee equipage. By the side of her plate was a small key. With trembling fingers she opened the post-bag. There was one letter. One only.

She opened and read it at once. It was dated from the House of Commons on the previous day.

"MY DEAR MISS PELLISSIER,—

"To-morrow the six months will be up. For days I have been undecided as to whether I would come to you or no. I would like you to believe that the decision I have arrived at—to stay away—is wholly and entirely to save you pain. It should be the happiest day of your life, and I would not detract

from its happiness by letting you remember for a moment that there are others to whom your inevitable decision must bring some pain.

"For I know that you love Ennison. You tried bravely enough to hide your preference, to look at us all with the same eyes, to speak to us in the same tone. It was not your fault you failed. If by any chance I have made a mistake a word will bring me to you. But I know very well that that word will never be spoken.

"Your great success has been my joy, our joy as as well as yours. You have made for yourself a unique place upon the stage. We have so many actresses who aspire to great things in the drama, not one who can interpret as you have interpreted it, the delicate finesse, the finer lights and shades of true comedy. Ennison will make a thousand enemies if he takes you from the stage. Yet I think that he will do it.

"For my own part I have come fully now into my inheritance. I am bound to admit that I greatly enjoy my altered life. Every minute I spend here is an education to me. Before very long I hope to have definite work. Some of my schemes are already in hand. People shrug their shoulders and call me a crazy socialist. Yet I fancy that we who have been poor ourselves must be the best judges of the needs of the people.

"You will write to me, I am sure—and from the date of your letter I trust most earnestly that I may come back to my old place as

"Your devoted friend,

"WALTER BRENDON."

She set the letter down, and drew from her pocket

another with a foreign post mark which had come the day before. This one too she read.

"HASSELL'S CAMP,
"NEAR COLORADO.

"On or about the day you receive this letter, Anna, the six months will be up. Do you expect me, I wonder. I think not. At any rate, here I am, and here I shall be, twenty thousand feet above all your poison-reeking cities, up where God's wind comes fresh from heaven, very near indeed to the untrodden snows. Sometimes I tremble, Anna, to think how near I came to passing through life without a single glimpse, a moment's revelation of this greatest and most awful of mysteries, the mystery of primaeval nature. It is a true saying that in the mountains there is peace. One's sense of proportion, battered out of all shape in the daily life of cities, reasserts itself. I love you still, Anna, but life holds other things than the love of man for woman. Some day I shall come back, and I will show you on canvas the things which have come to me up here amongst the eternal silence.

"Many nights I have thought of you, Anna. Your face has flitted out of my watch-fire, and then I have been a haunted man. But with the morning, the glorious unstained morning the passion of living would stir even the blood of a clod. It comes over the mountains, Anna, pink darkening into orange red, everywhere a wonderful cloud sea, scintillating with colour. It is enough to make a man throw away canvas and brushes into the bottomless precipices, enough to make one weep with despair at his utter and absolute impotence. Nature is God, Anna, and the greatest artist of us

all a pigmy. When I think of those ateliers of ours, the art jargon, the decadents with their flamboyant talk I long for a two-edged sword and a minute of Divinity. To perdition with them all.

"I shall come back, if at all, a new man. I have a new cult to teach, a new enthusiasm. I feel years younger, a man again. My first visit will be to you. I must tell you all about God's land, this marvellous virgin country, with its silent forests and dazzling peaks. I make no apology for not being with you now. You love Ennison. Believe me, the bitterness of it has almost departed, crushed out of me together with much of the weariness and sorrow I brought with me here by the nameless glory of these lonely months. Yet I shall think of you to-day. I pray, Anna, that you may find your happiness.

"Your friend,

"DAVID COURTLAW."

"PS.—I do not congratulate you on your success. I was certain of it. I am glad or sorry according as it has brought you happiness."

Anna eyes were a little dim as she poured out her coffee, and the laugh she attempted was not altogether a success.

"This is all very well," she said, "but two out of the three are rank deserters—and if the papers tell the truth the third is as bad. I believe I am doomed to be an old maid."

She finished her breakfast and strolled out across the garden with the letters still in her hand. Beyond was a field sloping steeply upwards, and at the top a small pine plantation. She climbed slowly towards it, keeping close to the hedge side, fragrant

with wild roses, and holding her skirts high above the dew-laden grass. Arrived in the plantation she sat down with her back against a tree trunk.

Already the warm sun was drawing from the pines their delicious odour. Below her stretched a valley of rich meadowland, of yellow cornfields, and beyond moorland hillside glorious with purple heather and golden gorse. She tried to compose her thoughts, to think of the last six months, to steep herself in the calm beauty of the surroundings. And she found herself able to do nothing of the sort. A new restlessness seemed to have stolen in upon her. She started at the falling of a leaf, at the lumbering of a cow through the hedge. Her heart was beating with quite unaccustomed vigour, her hands were hot, she was conscious of a warmth in her blood which the summer sunshine was scarcely responsible for. She struggled against it quite uselessly. She knew very well that a new thing was stirring in her. The period of repression was over. It is foolish, she murmured to herself, foolish. He will not come. He cannot.

And then all her restlessness was turned to joy. She sprang to her feet and stood listening with parted lips and eager eyes. So he found her when he came round the corner of the spinney.

"Anna," he cried eagerly.

She held out her arms to him and smiled.

* * * * *

"And where," he asked, "are my rivals ?"

"Deserters," she answered, laughing. "It is you alone, Nigel, who have saved me from being an old maid. Here are their letters."

He took them from her and read them. When

he came to a certain sentence in Brendon's letter he stopped short and looked up at her.

"So Brendon and I," he said, "have been troubled with the same fears. I too, Anna, have watched and read of your success with—I must confess it—some misgiving."

"Please tell me why?" she asked.

"Do you need me to tell you? You have tasted the luxury of power. You have made your public, you are already a personage. And I want you for myself—for my wife."

She took his hand and smiled upon him.

"Don't you understand, Nigel," she said softly, "that it was precisely for this I have worked so hard. It is just the aim I have had in view all the time. I wanted to have something to give up. I did not care—no woman really cares—to play the beggar maid to your King Cophetua."

"Then you will really give it all up!" he exclaimed.

She laughed.

"When we go indoors I will show you the offers I have refused," she answered. "They have all been trying to turn my head. I think that nearly every manager in London has made me an offer. My reply to all of them has been the same. My engagement at the 'Garrick' terminates Saturday week, and then I am free."

"You will make me horribly conceited," he answered. "I think that I shall be the most unpopular man in London. You are not playing to-night, are you?"

"Not to-night," she answered. "I am giving my understudy a chance. I am going up to dine with my sister."

"Annabel is a prophetess," he declared. "I too am asked."

"It is a conspiracy," she exclaimed. "Come, we must go home and have some luncheon. My little maidservant will think that I am lost."

They clambered down the hill together. The air was sweet with the perfume of flowers, and the melody of murmuring insects, the blue sky was cloudless, the heat of the sun was tempered by the heather-scented west wind. Ennison paused by the little gate.

"I think," he said, "that you have found the real home of the lotos-eaters. Here one might live the life of golden days."

She shook her head gently.

"Neither you nor I, Nigel, are made of such stuff," she answered. "These are the playgrounds of life. The great heart of the world beats only where men and women are gathered together. You have your work before you, and I——"

He kissed her on the lips.

"I believe," he said, "that you mean me to be Prime Minister."

CHAPTER XXXVII

SIR JOHN PROPOSES A TOAST

SIR JOHN raised his glass.

"Mr. Ennison," he said, with a touch of his former pomposity, "permit me to supplement my more formal congratulations of a few minutes ago by drinking your very good health. Anna," he added, turning towards her, "it is hard to know what to wish you, for you seem to have everything. You have health, success, and—Ennison. I think that instead I must ask you to drink with me to our mutual forgiveness. May I be a better brother-in-law in the future than I have been in the past."

"The balance of fault is on my side," Anna said softly. "We will drink forgetfulness to all those things which are better forgotten."

"It may interest you to know," Sir John remarked setting down his glass, "that the wine came from the cellars of a very rising young firm of wine merchants, Messrs Montague Hill & Co."

"He has quite recovered then?" Anna asked.

"Absolutely," Sir John answered. "The man seems to have come to his senses in more ways than one. He is engaged to be married to a little girl out Hampstead way, and seems perfectly contented. I

met them together in Regent Street this afternoon and had the honour of an introduction."

"And what were you doing in Regent Street, sir?" Annabel demanded.

Sir John thrust his hand into his pocket.

"Buying these little mementoes of a very delightful day," he answered, producing two morocco cases, one of which he passed to Anna, and one to Annabel. "Come, Ennison, the carriage is waiting, and the Division might come off in a quarter of an hour now. We must not forget that we are servants of the people."

They left the room amidst a little duologue of delight. Sir John knew how to make handsome presents, and had sufficiently good taste not to attempt to choose them himself. Annabel linked her arm through her husband's, and insisted upon seeing him off herself. She lit his cigarette, pulled his tie straight and rearranged the orchid in his buttonhole. When the two men entered the House of Commons a few minutes later an acquaintance, who stopped to speak to Ennison, looked after his companion with an amused smile.

"Never knew a man improved so much by marrying a young wife as Sir John," he remarked. "He's getting positively jaunty."

Ennison went on his way laughing.

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Back in Cavendish Square the two girls were sitting over the fire in Annabel's own room. They were sitting very close together, and there were traces of tears in Annabel's eyes.

"I think, Anna," she said softly, "that I am cured for ever of expecting romance only from

romantic people. I shall never forget—telling John! It seemed to me fair to tell him, and yet so very hopeless."

Anna nodded.

"I too think, dear," she answered, "that it was wonderful."

"I always thought of him," Annabel continued, "as hide-bound in conventionality, and you know how engrossed he was with this electioneering. Yet when I had told him, it was just as though such a place as Parliament did not exist. He never seemed to think of it, or the election for a moment. I expected to find him gloomy and depressed on the journey. He was nothing of the sort. He was simply deliciously excited all the time. And, Anna, when he began to try and dress like a Frenchman I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He wore a ready-made suit of French clothes and a big floppy tie, and I'm sure he practised walking on his toes all the time. I never loved any one so much, Anna, in all my life as I loved him then. Everything seemed altogether different. It has done so ever since."

Anna smiled.

"People are always so different from what we expect," she remarked. "You meet an ordinary sort of person who seems fairly obvious, and after a time you begin to find yourself bored with him just because you feel sure that you know all about him, and exactly what he would do under certain conditions. And then the conditions come, and you rub your eyes and feel very small. The timid person becomes a hero, the stolid person discloses a marvellous vein of sentiment, the virtuous person shocks us, and the rake becomes a puritan. Look

of our friend Mr. Montague Hill, a vulgar passionate man, half crazed with his own folly. Yet he was not afraid to die with a falsehood upon his lips. It was a fine impulse which made him write and sign that paper. Yet you might have watched the man all your life, and seen nothing to make you believe him capable of it."

Anna sprang up and listened. A delightful smile had parted her lips.

"Baby is awake," she exclaimed. "Let us go and see him."

Anna came first from the nursery, and waiting for her sister drew aside for a moment the curtains which hung before the window. It came to her with a momentary flash of recollection that at the three great crises of her inward life she had found herself like this, looking out into the night. Was it some secret desire for the sympathy of these millions of her fellow-creatures, these sleeping and toiling and pleasure-hunting sons and daughters of the world, or was it perhaps because the strain of life and her own emotions had suddenly become so tense that the walls of builded houses had stifled her? So much had happened since the fiat of David Courtlaw and her own passionate desire for real and intimate contact with life and its natural forces had made of her something of an adventuress. Yet she was conscious now of a certain delightful sense of rest. She had notched her experiences deep, she felt herself no longer a dilettante in emotions. She had passed lightly through the maelstrom of life, she knew now what was meant by the storm and the swirl and the tempest of living. And before her——

The light in the great clock tower went suddenly out. A faint flush stained her cheeks, her eyes grew wonderfully soft. Nigel [illegible] was on his way home.

FINIS.

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